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This book is based on a collection of those short essays and prayers that I've written over 20 years. Within these pages I express the mysteries of my faith — essentially, I share with the reader the theology and philosophy that was instilled in me as a youth and young man in the 1960's and that has been confirmed in my adult life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Engineering my own Salvation with Fear and Trembling."
~ Phillipians 2:12

Larry was born in 1941 and raised in Leavenworth, WA until leaving for college. From 1959 to 1964, he attended Seattle University, a Jesuit college, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering. From 1964 to 1975, Larry worked for the US Forest Service and two private engineering companies, surveying, designing and constructing subdivisions, roads and utilities. From 1975 to 2000, he was an engineering and business manager for the City of Bellevue in public works and utilities, retiring December 31, 1999. Since retirement, he's provided consulting services to local public agencies. Larry is a lifetime member of the American Public Works Association where he received a number of recognitions at the state and national levels for his efforts.

Larry's Catholic faith has grown from his early grade and high school years, through a Catholic university including theology and philosophy courses, and serving in various ministries in local parishes for over 50 years. He is currently a Sacristan, Lector and Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion at St. Mary Star of the Sea Parish in Port Townsend, WA.

Larry and Karen, his wife of 53 years, have three children and six grandchildren and reside near Port Townsend. This is his first book, a collection of essays that he's written over the last 20 years.

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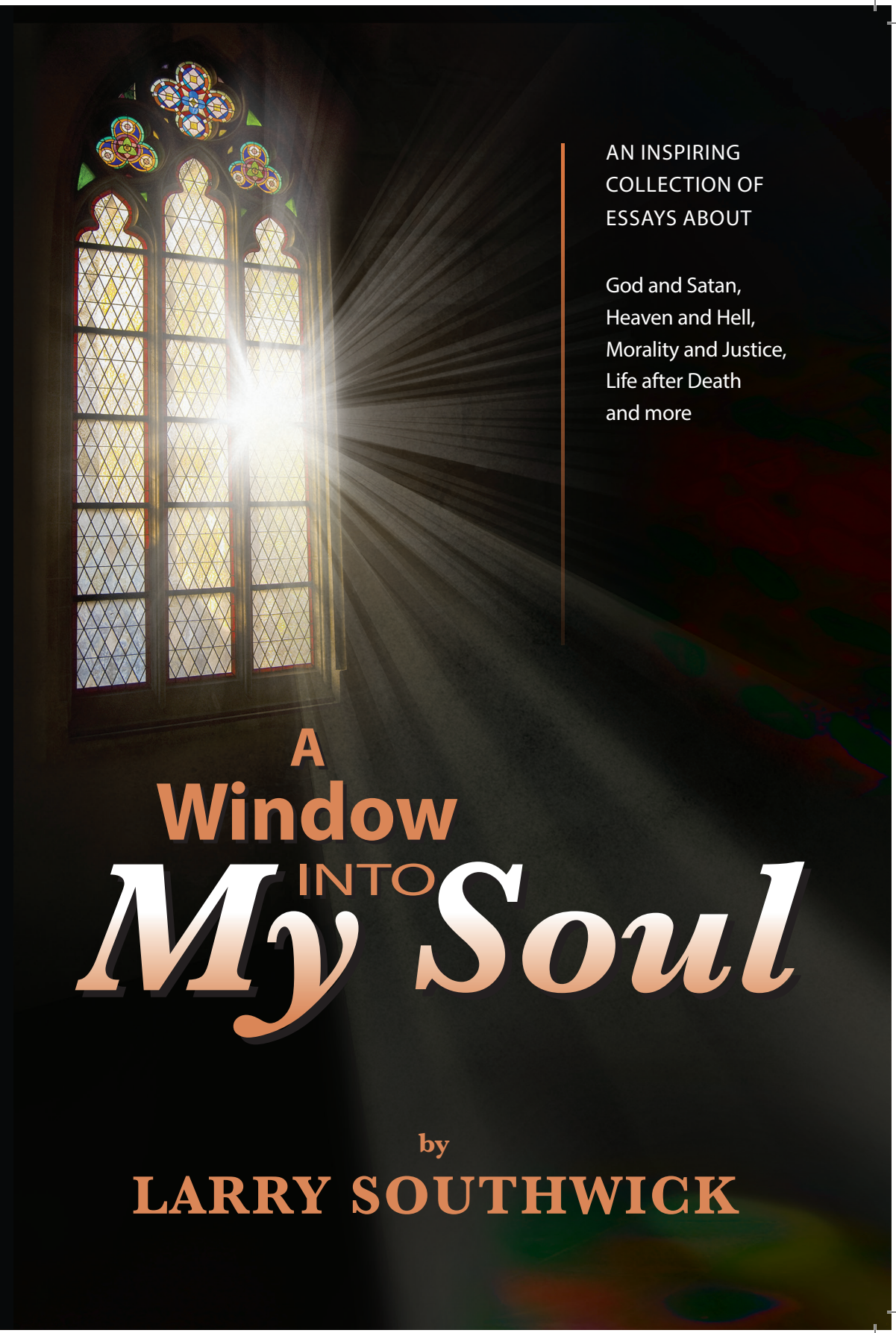
A Window Into My Soul

LARRY SOUTHWICK



AN INSPIRING COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ABOUT

God and Satan,
Heaven and Hell,
Morality and Justice,
Life after Death
and more

A Window INTO My Soul

by

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A WINDOW INTO MY SOUL

By Larry Southwick

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Thank you,

Larry

PREFACE

For many years, I would jog a few miles several days a week. That gave me a lot of time for thinking, which then turned into a few prayers and then more thinking about what I was praying about. I was losing track of some of the thoughts so I started writing them down, just to capture them as the inspiration led me at the time. This book is based on a collection of those short essays and prayers that I've written over 20 years.

I'll go more into what and why in the first chapter, but a simple explanation may help at this point. These essays express my understanding of the mysteries of my faith. I don't go into private matters or opinions, just into what I was thinking at the moment these ideas were jotted down.

I began my childhood religious education with the *Baltimore Catechism* some 60-plus years ago. I attended public schools. Our local parish religious education classes were called the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine; we knew it as CCD. After high school, I attended Seattle University, a Jesuit Catholic institution where we all had to take a core of both theology and philosophy classes. Over the years since, I've been actively involved in parish life in several ministries. That's provided me a continuous connection to grow my faith, the subject of these essays.

Scholars and theologians have written volumes about some of the issues I ponder – truth, faith, God, Satan, soul, justice, the power of prayer. I am no expert, but share my thoughts openly in a conversational style so that you, too, will feel comfortable to search your own thoughts, feelings, and faith, and perhaps share them in turn.

Your comments, pro and con, about the issues discussed in the essays are welcome on my website: http://www.windowintomysoul.com/ and social media.

God bless you with insight and inspiration on your own journey and thank you for your consideration.

— Larry Southwick

PS – I've also published a related Study Guide that can be used when reading this book or as a tool for discussion. Please consider it as an aid to getting the most out of this book.

CHAPTER 1

The Big Picture

This first chapter introduces you to my faith in God and Satan, heaven and hell, and spiritual life. Whether you agree or disagree, I hope these essays provide a basis by which you can examine your own faith or lack thereof.

I LOVE YOU, PLEASE TALK WITH ME

Hi.

You know me well and I love you. When you were an infant, I was your mother and I nursed you with tender care. When you were a toddler, I picked you up when you fell and hurt yourself. When you were in preschool, I was your father, the one who held you close and read wonderful stories to you. When you were in school, I was the teacher who taught and encouraged you. When you were a teenager, I was the boyfriend or girlfriend who shared your troubles. When you were a young adult, I was the best friend who spent hours talking about everything important to you. When you got married, I was at the center of the promise to love and care for you the rest of your life – for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death. I am your grandmother, favorite uncle, close friend, mentor. I am your closest loved one, the one you trust with your most intimate feelings. We are going to have a heart-to-heart talk, just between the two of us. I love you, please talk with me.

Get comfortable. Close your eyes and remember some of the moments we've shared; the fun and the joy; the challenges and triumphs. Life is good. I love you, please talk with me.

You are looking at a white paper with black markings on it but it means so much more to you. You read the words and they speak to you, fill your thoughts and penetrate your consciousness. I can tell you wonderful stories that make you feel good about yourself. I can tell you sad stories that make you cry. I can tell you funny stories that make you laugh. I can tell you stories that strengthen your faith and give you hope. Even if you don't like the stories or doubt the feelings, remember: I love you, please talk with me.

You learn in many ways. Teachers put you through assignments that exercise your intellect and memory. They expand your knowledge by constantly moving the subject material up the scale, from the basics to the intermediate levels and on to the highest levels you are able to understand. And you retain that knowledge as part of you. Experience from your earliest age through your latest moment teaches you about life. You learn how to relate to other people, both those you love and those you don't. You learn how to apply yourself, to learn, to work, and contribute to the team effort. You bring knowledge, skills, and experience to the task at hand, be it solving

a problem or doing your job. All of what you've learned is now a part of you, your very innermost self.

Take a few moments to think about how your knowledge and experience is really who you are. I love you, please talk with me.

The fact that you are this beautiful, multifaceted person with skills and abilities and knowledge is no accident. It's not just a matter of your biological being or your psychological being or your intellectual being. You are a unique person and there is not, never has been, and never will be another you. All persons, all races, all places, and all times have included many millions of people who, in the sense of being human, are all alike and yet each one is different. Each one of us has a special purpose.

You are your mother's child, your spouse's loved one, someone's caretaker. You contribute to society, you perform a job, you help others. Everyone has a role in a family, a neighborhood, a community, and the world. Some are leaders and others are followers. Some are thinkers and others are doers. Some are scientists and others are teachers. Some provide food and others provide care. Some labor in physical jobs and others provide essential services. Together they make up a society.

Take a few minutes to consider your own special role and appreciate what you contribute to your family and your community. I love you, please talk with me.

Life is wonderful, but it also has its pains and sorrows. You are born, grow up, have a family and career, and, if you're lucky, you grow old. You have healthy times and sick times. Some people never have healthy times, so count your blessings. You have strengths and weaknesses. Some people never have strong times, so be grateful. You may live a prosperous life with many material comforts while some people literally never have a dime to their name. There are always people with more or less than you. Be thankful, regardless of your status. I love you, please talk with me.

Your life is much more than the physical and temporal things you see. Your soul is the real essence of your life. Your soul is your personality, your intellect, your memories, your knowledge, your experiences, and more. It is what makes you, you, that unique person. What's more, your soul will live on forever after your bodily death.

Think about that and trust me enough to carry on this conversation. I love you, please talk with me.

I created your soul, but that doesn't mean I predestined you or made you for a puppet. I gave you free will to choose your own life. Your personality, intellect, memories, knowledge, and experiences are yours, not mine. And just because scientists can explain that the earth came from a big bang and life emerged from a swamp, doesn't mean that it wasn't created by me. I designed it, put it in its place in time, and sent my Son to you so that you could know me. You can also know a great deal about me just by looking at yourself.

I love you, please talk with me.

God

CONSIDERATION: If you believe that God has been a real part in your own life, that he is always present and listening, do you talk with him? Why or why not? How?

KNOCK, KNOCK

Why is it that most of us shy away from people who want to talk to us about religion?

We probably have all experienced the knock on our door by a person bearing pamphlets or a stranger on the street pushing a flier at us. For some reason, there is a turnoff inside us that says, "I don't want to hear this" or "don't bother me." We pretend there is no one home; we look away; we toss the flier in the trash.

That's the reason I write these things for you. I have something to say but I don't want to say it directly because I don't want to offend you or give you reason to reject me. I recall only one point outside of organized religious functions when I had an open, comfortable discussion with another person about religion. He was more of an evangelist than I and initiated the contact, but it wasn't threatening or offensive. We had a nice chat about the things we shared in common and didn't try to influence each other.

So why is it that I've had a strong faith since my childhood and am more trained in my religion than many, yet can't bring myself to be an evangelist for my faith?

Our Constitution espouses the importance of freedom of religion, but our culture has long held that it's not a subject for dinner conversation and polite company. It is deeply personal, and I think most of us feel whatever we believe or disbelieve is right and don't want that challenged or contradicted by anyone, even our loved ones.

There is a specific example of this in the Bible where Jesus is talking to his own community. His words and deeds are "godly", but the people just didn't want to hear it. After all, he's just the son of a local carpenter, they say. He can't be anything more than a crackpot. And he's telling them things they don't want to hear. He can't do the good works with the people in his own community that he's been doing in other places because of their resistance.

> *And "Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house."* (Mark 6:4)

And that's the key. We resist. We tend to be relatively closed minded when it comes to religion. We cling to the familiar, the comfortable. We may listen to the priest or minister, but often reject the possibility that our spouses, parents, children, friends, and especially strangers can bring new insights to our faith.

So here I am, writing what I want to say but not able to say it to you. Are you even still reading this or have you already turned off and turned away?

CONSIDERATION: What's your feeling of talking about religion? Some are very open and willing to talk and others completely avoid the subject. Why can't we just have a normal conversation about it?

WHO IS YOUR GOD?

The First Commandment states: "I, the Lord, am your God; you shall not have other gods besides me." (Exodus 20) That, of course, comes from Jewish heritage, Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, and was fully incorporated into the Christian faith. Other religions have similar precepts, especially Islam, which says neither the prophet nor God can be violated in any manner and such violations are punishable by death.

So, who is your God?

Throughout history, peoples and civilizations have sought God and, in fact, have created and named their own gods. Those civilizations were seeking the source above all that empowered everything in their lives, and they found it in their own ways. For better or for worse, that's what is happening throughout the world today. People are creating their own gods to serve their own belief systems and purposes. And, like our historical predecessors, many of their gods are pagan.

Those gods are the offspring of the human condition, and they put up barriers between us and the authentic God. The primary ones are known as the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth. They produce the false gods of unbridled fame, fortune, and selfishness, heinous violence, and promiscuous sex that taint our world and our relationships.

I believe in God and I believe in Satan. I believe in the Holy Trinity: God the father, Jesus Christ the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit as the essence of God. I believe in angels and saints as well as the opposing evil spirits. My daily prayer is: "My Lord and my God, I believe in you, I trust in you, I love you. I want to do your will and bring your love to those whom I love."

People who follow false gods are basically saying to God, "I don't believe in you, I don't trust you, and I don't love you." If that is what one feels at the time of death, that's the ultimate rejection of God that leads directly and permanently to hell. And that's exactly where Satan wants us to be. Satan is the original false god.

Rarely does anyone decide to follow Satan or to hold him in high regard. Satan knows that, so what does he do? He helps us find and choose those other false gods. Hitch a ride with him and soon you are going down his highway.

I think the majority of people either consciously or subconsciously want to go to heaven, the home of love and peace and all other satisfaction. Although most of us are not sufficiently prepared to immediately enter through the heavenly gates, purgatory is far better than hell because it will prepare us for heaven and God's welcoming arms.

All of the major Bibles of the Western world religions are based on high levels of ecumenical scholarly study and interpretation of numerous original texts. What we read in a reputable Bible is the legitimate translation of the exact words written by the original authors thousands of years ago. While each of us may reach different conclusions about the applications of the Bible in our lives, the historical significance is real and true. The Old Testament is the history of the Jewish people up to the time of Christ. The four Gospels in the New Testament are the historical narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, who really did live and die as described in the Bible. And the rest of the New Testament is written by Jesus' own followers and witnesses to the early days of the Christian revolution.

So I ask you to be open to the real knowledge and truth that is conveyed in the Bible and other scholarly texts that define and explain the reality of God and the implications of that reality.

CONSIDERATION: Who is your God? What do you experience about the existence of God? What are your daily and life goals, actions, and thoughts? Where are they leading you? Are they false gods?

THE BIG PICTURE

Close your eyes for a minute and open your mind's eye. Picture a room in your house. You can see the room, the things and the people in it; you can even expand your view to see the next room too. In fact, you can see what just happened and, with a little thought, you can envision what will likely happen in the next few minutes. It's not that you see the future; it's that you can use your knowledge and experience to project what is likely to happen again or some variation of it. And you can see the past through your own direct experience or using the experience of others.

Through this book, we're going to expand that picture and see some of the past, present, and future of your life. You'll have to apply the specifics and together we'll fill out the picture.

Most importantly, we're going to see beyond death. Are you willing to take that look into the future?

God, the Creator and Savior, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, really exists. He has been and always is directly involved in everything that happens on earth, for all eternity, from before the first humans until the last ones are long dead.

God is alive and directly involved in our very own lives. We all have a temporal life, our body, and a spiritual life, our soul. Our temporal life is just that – temporary – and every one of us will die, just as human beings have done since the beginning of time. But our spiritual life is eternal, because God created us in his own image and he saved us from death through his own sacrifice and death on the cross.

God created the world and all life to observe and be guided by his natural laws, both physical and social. The natural physical laws of gravity, motion, light, energy, biology, etc. govern our temporal existence. These physical laws are so powerful that we can only work with them, not change them. The natural social laws of morality, freedom, justice, virtue, love, etc. govern our spiritual existence. God has clearly and repeatedly written these laws on our conscience and in our societies throughout all ages. We may disobey and bend them, but they are, at their core, immutable. They are not ours to change.

God gave people freedom to create and mold our physical environment for the benefit of society. We have domesticated animals, farmed lands,

produced foods, and constructed shelters. We have extracted elements and minerals from earthly resources to produce heat, electricity, transportation, and millions of other modern conveniences. However, in some cases we have violated God's natural laws relative to the environment and are bound to suffer the consequences. Watch the evening news and you'll see that we already are.

Likewise, God gave us freedom to mold our social environment. All of history has experienced great leaders, advanced and enlightened civilizations, intellectual and cultural advancement. But our past and present also have a strong history of war, persecution, violence, and abuse in every realm of society. Given that broad framework, let's look at some of the current social dilemmas faced by our society. The physical dilemmas are far beyond the ability of this writer.

It comes down to one word – morality. God created natural social laws to guide our moral conduct for the good of our entire human society. Historically, he has influenced every culture with great moral leaders and teachers who have helped weave a strong moral fabric for societies. The Jewish framework gave us the Ten Commandments. The Judeo-Christian framework gave us clear moral direction in all areas of social life, the Bible being the primary source. Similar moral guidance has been provided in other major religious cultures.

While all societies throughout history have endured rebellions tearing at their moral fabric, the foundations have remained. I am concerned however, that the current war on morality has the ultimate goal of removing all vestiges of moral law. The laws of the United States banished teaching of religious principles from public education on the premise that government can't establish religion. The law has banned prayer and religious expressions in public places, including removal of the Ten Commandments and Christmas trees. The law has legalized the destruction of innocent human life by abortion. The law has legalized divorce to the point where commitment to marriage and family is adhered to only when convenient. And now, the law has legalized marriage between any two people regardless of gender.

The result is moral degradation of human life in its fundamental, spiritual form. We are violating God's natural laws. Mounting these attacks denies God's existence and role in these natural laws. The many and varied leaders of this war obscure their goals and use politically correct language to disguise their purpose. What's amazing is that many seemingly good people who talk, act, and identify as Christians are actually fighting on the wrong

side under the banner of political correctness and fairness. One can only realize that the immoral enemy is God's antithesis and that this is, in fact, the epic war for the soul of humanity.

And where is the opposition to the immoral warriors? They, too, are fighting those same battles, battles from within.

For example, although the Catholic Church provides a strong basis for moral laws, many Catholics choose to ignore fundamental teachings, including the simple act of going to Mass on Sunday. The legal and spiritual failings of Church leaders in dealing with the sexual abuse scandals display the difficulty of waging a strong moral war. They tried to cover it up and smooth it over instead of bringing to light and justice the moral collapse of some of the clergy. The immoral war is being waged just as much within and against the Catholic Church itself as it is in society at large.

Too few Protestant leaders have spoken out publicly against this immoral war, while others have betrayed their flocks with scandals and greed of their own. Some fundamentalists of various religions incite us-versus-them politics and violence.

Greed and corruption coexist with power regardless of religion. The powerful make their own rules and disregard moral rules.

Youth everywhere seem corrupted, at least heavily influenced, by rampant illicit behaviors glorified in music, TV, film, and even in our schools. The world is dominantly immoral, period. Our laws and societies are secular and materialistic. Our educational systems don't support moral enlightenment. Our politically correct environment constrains resistance to immoral persuasion. And our own families experience loss of religious practices, divorce, and sexual misconduct.

So, moral warriors, what are we to do to win this battle? First, we will only win if we are truly on God's side. We must carefully discern God's will and follow it, and we must demand the same from our religious and political leaders. Second, we must inspect our own lives and make them spiritual and moral, conforming our own principles and standards to God's. Third, we must put our lives in God's hands and put ourselves at his disposal. Fourth, we must support real moral leadership and efforts to influence moral outcomes. Fifth, we must promote peace, justice, and care for those suffering throughout the world. Last and always, pray, pray, pray.

The ultimate answer in this epic war over morality is that God will prevail, although that may not take the form we envision. We will all be held accountable for our own moral and immoral actions. The rest of our life and our life after death is at stake. We are dependent upon God's love and mercy as well as his judgment and justice.

CONSIDERATION: What is your moral code? Is it a set of rules imposed by society or something inherent within you? Are God and Satan, heaven and hell a part of that basis?

WHY SHOULD YOU BELIEVE?

When Christ spoke directly to his apostles and disciples, his words were taken down and passed on to us in written words consolidated into the New Testament. During Christ's earthly ministry, he sent his apostles and disciples to preach on his behalf and sent them forth with special powers to heal the sick and perform other miracles. When Christ died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to his apostles and disciples to form and strengthen them to continue his mission on earth. Immediately at Pentecost, they were so moved by the Holy Spirit that they spoke in languages that were understood by everyone present and consequently converted several thousand people that day. They went on to convert tens of thousands of people throughout the known world in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Before that first generation of apostles and disciples passed away, through the authority that had been given to them by Christ, they prayed over their followers and ordained specific ministers to carry on the mission to preach to the entire world. That mission has been continued directly from Christ through his immediate followers, through the ordination of their immediate followers, and subsequently down through the centuries of popes, bishops, priests, and laity to this very day. That is how Christ intended his words to be passed on to all generations and peoples, through the direct authority and chain of succession, sent forth to preach and convert the entire world. So we can reliably read and listen to the words of these successors of Christ.

Further, through the Mass, priests bring Christ to life through the Eucharist, his own body and blood. And God is fully present in the Word.

Look all around you at the people, the landscape, everything. Beauty, peace, love, justice, compassion, mercy, charity, and all the wondrous things in life are from God; in fact, inseparable from God. By contrast, persecution, injustice, hatred, fraud, and all the immoral things emerge from Satan.

What would you like all things to be? The first set of characteristics or the second? You choose. Every day, in every act and every thought, you make that choice. And the way you choose could stem from your belief or disbelief in God.

Why would you choose not to believe? So you can make the issue disappear and no longer concern yourself with it?

Because you, like all of us to one extent or another, are influenced by others who don't believe in God or Satan.

Perhaps the tenets of Catholicism and Christianity are too challenging or make you uncomfortable for one reason or another. Perhaps you disagree with Church leaders' handling of issues and scandals. Maybe organized religion puts demands on your actions or time that you don't want. You have your reasons, no doubt.

You do good things. You are truthful. You are loving and compassionate. Most of the time. But we all have some weaknesses and failings, and those may be under the influence of Satan. He wheedles his way into those weaknesses, exploits them, and soon we are following his path. He doesn't want you to believe in God and deceives you into following him even though you don't believe in him either.

Your lack of faith in God is not because you are a bad person; in fact, the opposite is most likely true, that you are a good person to your very core. Your lack of faith stems from accepting the ways that Satan makes denial and disbelief attractive to you. Satan is the ultimate deceiver. You have your reasons for being a non-believer and won't attribute them to any outside spirit. But God and his antithesis are real and they influence your thoughts and actions.

CONSIDERATION: What do you believe? Why? Even believers sometimes choose to avoid God and his call to faith. What would it take to increase your faith?

A CLOSED MIND

The Bible is generally accepted by Christians as legitimate truth. There is a God and he has consistently communicated his plan for us. Jesus Christ is God's son, was born from a human mother, lived a real human life with some obvious exceptions, was crucified, died, and buried. He conquered death and rose to a new form of life. The Holy Spirit came to teach and strengthen his church and has supported that church throughout its history.

Satan is also very real as are the many evil spirits that carry out his work. Satan is the ultimate deceiver. He makes everything that is right look wrong and everything that is wrong seem right. Satan is the polar opposite of God.

There really is life after death; heaven, hell, and something in between we call purgatory. One of those is our destiny after death; where we end up depends entirely on how we live our life here and now. That also means there is a real spiritual world around us and that we already live a spiritual life, along with our temporal body's life. Our spiritual life will live for eternity.

A closed mind says all those statements are false and don't exist. A closed mind says that it's not closed at all because it is open to all other sources of knowledge and belief systems, just not this one. A closed mind doesn't want to change.

I encourage you to continue to read with a mind open to the possibilities. Think. Question. Analyze. What are your disagreements with the way I've described things and where do they come from? Are they based on facts or opinions? Or someone else's opinions? Can you substantiate your reasons for disagreement?

In this secular world, you may have never been exposed to these matters or at least never had them explained to your satisfaction. Or, you may have been exposed to them and at some point in your life, decided that they weren't true or applicable to you. Or maybe they are true to you, but you're not motivated to practice them in your life. You are not alone, many people feel that way.

But not all. There have been heroic people throughout the ages who have put their lives at risk to defend these Christian principles; religious leaders who have devoted their lives to practicing these principles; scholars who have researched, studied, and taught these subjects in detail; and

everyday people who strive to live their lives according to these teachings. There are uncountable volumes of written material that support faith in God.

An open mind is a gift of God. A closed mind is sealed against God by Satan. You can see the dilemma – for or against God. And even an open mind doesn't guarantee that it will reach God because Satan continually works against it.

The strongest example I can give of this is scientific thinking. To be accepted as fact in the natural world, theories have to meet strict criteria; they have to be substantiated repeatedly through experiment and observation. Since no one can see God directly, his existence cannot be physically proven. Same with Satan or any other spiritual entity. That also means nothing can be ascribed to God or Satan. No creation. No miracles. No faith. In science, things have to conform to the laws of physics, biology, chemistry, etc. What many scientists don't accept is that God created those rules; science just discovered them. Scientists tend not to go beyond what they can observe or measure to explain where those natural laws truly came from. That's a closed mind.

CONSIDERATION: If you don't already believe in God, is your mind closed to any consideration of the possibility? Why? What would it take to open your mind?

CHAPTER 2

TRUTH AND FAITH

There are at least two sides to every argument. Each person lines up on the side considered correct based on the truth as they see it.

Faith takes that knowledge of truth to the next level, where one can firmly believe that something is true even though they can't directly prove or disprove it. Does God exist? Those with faith say "yes" while those without that faith say "no." What is the truth? Or is it an opinion?

TRUTH

> *Jesus answered (in response to Pilate's question), "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here." So Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king.* **For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.***" Pilate said to him, "***What is truth***?"*
> (John 18:36-38, emphasis added)

This question and answer are repeated throughout history and certainly in our own time. Jesus still says, "Whoever belongs to the truth, listens to my voice" and the world keeps answering, "What is truth?" For most people who lack faith, truth is not even an issue. For those who only want to believe in the easy part they accept, it's a question better avoided. They don't want to know the truth; they only want to hear what meets their own standards or they simply cling to popular opinion and deny the truth.

So, how much evidence does it take to establish the truth? In July 2015 Stephen Hawking, the renown British theoretical physicist and cosmologist, and Yuri Milner, a Russian tycoon, announced a $100 million project to determine whether extraterrestrial life exists in the universe. By using the most recent and definitive technology, they want to scientifically prove either existence or nonexistence of any intelligent life out there. Obviously, if they find such evidence, it could be accepted. But even finding a faint signal of some type is pretty far from knowing what life may or may not exist in the cosmos. If they don't find physical evidence, does that definitively mean that such life doesn't exist? Does lack of scientific evidence prove, beyond a doubt, that something doesn't exist? Or show that scientists have a gap in their knowledge? Or does it prove they don't understand the evidence they do have?

If one is to really believe in God and the potential for eternal salvation versus damnation, you would think one would want to know the truth before it's too late. But many still want to believe that no such risk is at stake, either

because we're all going to be saved anyway or there really is no damnation. Some completely deny there is life after death. So, what's the truth?

The key to the truth seems to be knowledge; what we can know through the action of our intellect. Truth is perceived in different ways by different people based on their knowledge of the subject. The better one knows a subject, the closer they are to the truth about it.

Other considerations are that knowledge is restricted by lack of evidence, limited intellectual capacity, or insufficient will to acquire the knowledge. If we don't have conclusive evidence, we don't necessarily know the truth. We may speculate or project an opinion based on some amount of evidence, but still not know the real truth.

A person with higher intellectual capacity can know the truth about some things that others just can't understand; for example, nuclear physics. Many things are only known through significant study. One cannot acquire comprehensive knowledge simply through experience. We go to school to get an education, but more than that, we go to school to acquire knowledge and to learn how to acquire more knowledge through our own efforts.

Some choose to become more knowledgeable about some things while others don't. That's an expression of their own will and interest, not necessarily lack of evidence or intellectual capacity. It seems that applies to many who choose to not learn about God. Many scientists, for example, opine that there is no God because they don't have tangible scientific evidence. Yet, they do not seek further knowledge or evidence of God. That is not due to lack of intellectual capacity, but it is an act of their free will. They choose to ignore or dispute the evidence of the existence and presence of God.

That is the nature of God and Satan. God created humankind with intellect and free will. He allows one to choose to accept or reject knowledge of God. He supports a favorable decision, but allows the negative decision. Satan is more than happy to step into that gap and convince man to limit his knowledge and will when it comes to God.

Here is the truth: We can, and do, know God from abundant evidence – historical, experiential, and spiritual.

CONSIDERATION: How do you determine the truth? What does it have to be based on? Do you accept the truth as determined by others with more knowledge of the subject? Why or why not?

FAITH

As defined in *Webster's Dictionary*, faith is:

> *Unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence; unquestioning belief in God; religious tenets; a religion or system of religious beliefs; anything believed; complete trust, confidence, or reliance.*

As defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, faith is:

> *Both a gift of God and a human act by which the believer gives personal adherence to God, who invites his response, and freely assents to the whole truth that God has revealed. It is this revelation of God which the Church proposes for our belief and which we profess in the Creed, celebrate in the sacraments, live by right conduct that fulfills the twofold commandment of charity (as specified in the Ten Commandments) and respond to in our prayer of faith. Faith is both a theological virtue given by God as grace and an obligation which flows from the first commandment of God.* (Glossary)

St. Thomas Aquinas, philosopher, theologian, doctor of the Church, was born in 1225 and died in 1274. He is considered the most eminent philosophical theologian ever to have lived. His writings are an encyclopedia of Catholic philosophy and theology. His explanation of truth and faith are compelling. He wrote, "So we may say that faith is a habit of the mind by which eternal life begins in us, a habit which makes the intellect assent to things that are not apparent." In another place he says, "The full affirmation does not proceed from the vision of the believer but from the vision of him in whom one believes" (*On Faith,* Q 14, Article 2).

From the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* regarding St. Thomas's writing on faith:

> *To begin with, Aquinas takes faith to be an intellectual virtue or habit, the object of which is God. Yet he also insists that it was necessary for God to reveal to us other*

truths by means of sacred teaching. Unlike the knowledge we acquire by our own natural aptitudes, Aquinas contends that revealed knowledge gives us a desire for goods and rewards that exceed this present life. Also, revealed knowledge may tell us more about God than what our demonstrative efforts actually show. Although our investigative efforts may confirm that God exists, they are unable to prove (for example) that God is fully present in three divine persons, or that it is the Christian God in whom we find complete happiness. Revealed knowledge also curbs the presumptuous tendency to think that our cognitive aptitudes are sufficient when trying to determine (more generally) what is true. By contrast, the assent of faith is voluntary.

So, faith involves the intellect and the will. We have to choose to accept faith in knowledge, not merely read or listen to it. Thus, faith is not something one can simply begin to practice, but something beyond human nature. We can open ourselves to the gift of faith through virtuous actions, but without the action of God, faith will never come to reside in our souls.

We may base our faith on our acceptance of the truth that is ascertained by others, such as St. Thomas, with higher levels of knowledge of the facts. The Catholic faith is based on Old and New Testament writings and more than 2,000 years of research, knowledge, and witness by scholars. It seems to me that there is no other base of knowledge that has more evidence, scholarship, and consistent deposition than that of the Catholic faith.

All of these essays are an expression of my faith – faith in God, faith in God's gifts to us, and faith in the teachings of the Church. I can only write through it and because of it.

CONSIDERATION: What is your own faith? Agnostic? Atheistic? Lukewarm? Evangelical? God exists, but I'm not interested? What's the point of learning more, we'll all be saved anyway? What do you base your faith upon?

BRAINWASHING?

Just for the sake of discussion: What if the entirety of the Catholic faith is based in myth and brainwashing? For over 2,000 years, this group of people – from the very first apostles and disciples to hundreds of millions around the entire world – have accepted and implemented a massive scheme to make the world a better place. And this so-called scheme is based on the teachings of one man, Jesus Christ. The existence of Jesus Christ is fact. You can read about him and his immediate followers in the New Testament of the Bible. He lived an inspiring life that ended in his being condemned as a criminal, scourged mercilessly, and executed by hanging on the cross.

His followers claimed he had performed miraculous works – healing all kinds of physical diseases and handicaps, raising dead people back to life, calming the storm, walking on water, etc. They claim that power came from his being the son of God. He taught the essentials of this scheme to his followers, and they embellished it as they went about converting others to their beliefs. Key messages in this scheme were to love God above all things, love your neighbor as yourself, and to perform charitable good works benefiting the poor, sick, imprisoned, and downtrodden. More difficult, he preached that we should love our enemies, forgive those who harm us, and resolve our disputes with compassion.

People loved it, and thousands converted in just days. The leaders of this group then traveled to surrounding regions to spread their messages of love and forgiveness; still more people converted. These messengers figured out how to pass this doctrine on through generations to today.

They spurred all kinds of men and women to take up the mantle of faith to become priests, deacons, and nuns. Believers of this supposed hoax organized schools to further the "brainwashing" and established hospitals where all in need were served. Artists and architects were inspired to create paintings, music, sculptures, and buildings dedicated to communicating the beauty and fellowship of their scheme. Then they asked for financial support and collected millions for their causes. For example, to this day Catholic Charities consistently rates in the top tier of all charitable organizations worldwide, regardless of church affiliation.

People all over the globe still believe this scheme. Priests and deacons preach the words of Jesus and the prophets before him. Nuns service those in need. The laity strives to share and live the principles of that upstart Jesus

of Nazareth – love and forgiveness, feed the hungry, shelter the poor and homeless, care for the suffering.

Can you believe it?

CONSIDERATION: Is this whole thing about faith in God and his son Jesus Christ, heaven and hell, just a big hoax? Why is it then based on doing so many good things for the benefit of humanity and for your own salvation?

CHAPTER 3

EVOLUTION

At the core of truth and faith is whether one believes in God's role in the creation of the universe and, ultimately, mankind. Until the theory of evolution was proposed, most people in the western world accepted, either verbatim or in general, the Old Testament's description of how God created Earth and humankind. The theory of evolution, especially proposed by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, provided an explanation of the universe without the necessity of a creator.

Today, most people fall into three categories of creation belief as it relates to God:

- Those who adhere to the Biblical description and deny evolution.
- Those who use evolution as their basis for denying God's existence.
- Those who understand evolution to be guided by God and not simply a long chain of accidents.

HUMAN – A CREATURE OF GOD OR AN ACCIDENT OF NATURE?

I was educated in Jesuit philosophy and am a firm believer in God and his creation of mankind. Knowing people and reading about others who absolutely deny any form of God or his role in creation, I've been giving the matter some thought.

The theory of evolution asserts the process as one of "natural selection" in which complex creatures develop over time from simpler ancestors through a series of random genetic anomalies that allow them to adapt to their environments and survive.

The question is: Was this process instigated by God or merely a series of accidents in nature? Neither in my wildest imagination nor in reality can I consider the intricacies of the human body or any other life form and conclude they are merely accidental genetic mutations without intelligent design.

So let's go through some of my thought process about how all this came to be. Out of the Big Bang one galaxy out of the billions hurtled through space with a lump of molten stew of minerals and gasses that eventually would become Earth. That fledgling planet was just close enough and just far enough from its star, our sun, to ultimately have moderate temperatures. It cooled enough to let the gasses form water and the water to collect into oceans and seas and to freeze at the poles. The fledgling earth went through periods of cataclysmic geological transformations of freezing and thawing, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, massive floods, and erosion, all shaping the planet we call home. Was this all by accident or by design?

Somehow, somewhere in that process, microbial life took hold. How could that happen from raw elements and gasses? Where did it come from? Was it spawned by the Big Bang? Did it come to earth on a colliding comet or asteroid? Or did it just coincidentally form over time from the raw materials with no outside cause or design? I argue that the first and subsequent forms of life could not have simply come from raw elements no matter how long those elements were mixed by the forces of heat, wind, and water. That's consistent with the laws of nature. That first speck of life had to come from some external cause or source.

So the first life forms were microbial and had the ability to reproduce and multiply. Where did they get that ability? And, given that ability, they would simply multiply in kind. Enter genetic mutation as the life forms adapted to their environments and evolved into slightly different forms over time. Did they only start from one cell in one place and then reproduce enough to spread around the world? Or did the source exist in numerous places so that it established itself over much of the planet in the same period of evolution? Did these life forms begin in water and jump to land or vice versa? Or did different forms start in different environments? Or did millions of different types of life begin in a similar period all over the Earth? Again, all this presumes no interference by God or by design, simply by accidents of nature.

Somewhere in the next period of evolution, the simple microbial life forms on land became plants with the fundamental characteristics that we now recognize – life cycle from seed through germination, growth, maturity, flowering, pollinating, producing more seed, dying, and starting all over again from seed. All very complex and beautiful. Somehow we are to believe this is all purely by natural selection and genetic mutation over eons with no help from God. Think hard about that. How could a microbe evolve into an oak tree, a blackberry bush, and all the millions of other complex plants?

If it had stopped there, we wouldn't be having this conversation, so now take it to another level. An entirely different set of microbes (from somewhere) mutated into diverse animal life forms. The complexity of plants is nothing compared to the animal kingdom, especially the vertebrates (fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals). These creatures have flesh and blood, lungs, hearts, circulation, muscles, bones, and brains. They reproduce in elaborate and complex ways. They hatch from eggs or are born live. They grow from birth to adult, reproduce, age, and die. They have various social systems and rituals. Did all this just simply happen with no design? I don't see how life could have achieved that level of complexity without a greater force at work.

The brain of an animal is beyond mere accidental mutation and the brain of a human is so far beyond that of an animal that it couldn't have occurred without God as designer and creator. So, without God and following pure natural selection, take mankind out of the world and give the apes another billion years to see if they could put a monkey on the moon or create and manufacture an iPhone or do a heart transplant or build a skyscraper or write a symphony or a sonnet.

Even some scientists, past and present, cannot parse the wonders of life into evidence that disproves God's influence on the universe, on us. Others are outright believers. Dr. Francis S. Collins, current director of the National Institutes of Health and former leader of the Human Genome Project, is a former atheist who became an evangelical Christian when he was 27. He also is a firm believer in evolution. In the PBS interview titled, *The Question of God*, Collins says:

> *If God chose to create you and me as natural and spiritual beings, and decided to use the mechanism of evolution to accomplish that goal, I think that's incredibly elegant. And because God is outside of space and time, He knew what the outcome was going to be right at the beginning. It's not as if there was a chance it wouldn't work. So where, then, is the discordancy that causes so many people to see these views of science and of spirit as being incompatible? In me, they both exist. They both exist at the same moment in the day. They're not compartmentalized. They are entirely compatible. And they're part of who I am.*

CONSIDERATION: What are your thoughts about evolution? Do you believe God had a hand in it? Are you open to considering it? If not, how did the universe and all life within it happen?

CREATION

In our pride, we blind ourselves to the reality that we can't see, trusting only that which we can understand and rejecting the reality that is beyond our comprehension. That blinds us to the reality of the original creation. Here's my explanation for creation from what I can see and believe.

God is and always has been spiritual in nature, so he's never been visible to the human eye directly unless he so desires to make it so, as in Jesus, the Son of God. But God has always been fully present in his creation, just not seen as we know it. He constantly interacted with creation of the universe throughout its formation from the big bang to present day earth. He not only was present but he was actively forming each and every component of matter and life with his divine intellect and will. God was the moving force behind every single step of evolution of every life form: plant, animal in the sea and on the land, and every human being, including ourselves.

So how did life first form in the very beginning? God willed it into being. How did he guide evolution from the simplest to the most complex life forms? He willed them into being over millions of years. He was present, changing each element to meet his divine design one small step at a time. God literally walked the earth in his supreme spiritual being, nurturing his creation.

I believe that God did create Adam and Eve to be the first human beings. How did that all happen?

First of all, it was God's constant plan throughout the creative process that human beings would be the end result so every step along the way from the very first life forms to the completion of Adam and Eve was guided by that goal. He literally built the complex biological systems that now comprise us from scratch and guided them through the process of evolution.

To me, that took place from the earliest and simplest forms of life up to and through the animal forms that immediately preceded Adam and Eve. There could have been a final animal life form that existed in a small singular group that formed the basis for human beings. They would have had all the biological elements of life that we now know of as animal. They would have likely lived in a similar manner as we now see in a band of apes: sleep, forage, eat, care for their young, and of course, mate to reproduce in sufficient numbers to exceed the death rate.

The only thing that was missing was the human soul which God imbedded in them when the life forms were complete and ready for that next final step. You could say that he breathed that soul into them at that point. I suspect that God imbued that first human soul into the embryo of the chosen mother animal, perhaps similar to his impregnating Mary with Jesus.

The resulting first human beings, Adam and similarly Eve, had our basic nature but still just above that of their parent animals because they had no other experience to go by. They were raised by animals as animals. But now, they had an intellect and could do things that their predecessors couldn't, using their new found intelligence to improve their condition, and beginning their development as humans.

In the human nature of their first souls, God also gave them free will to determine their own course of action. And, unfortunately, Satan was also present to Adam and Eve, as he is right now to us. God allowed them the freedom to follow Satan's suggestions which at some point they did, forever binding humans with original sin and its consequences.

CONSIDERATION: What do you think about this description of creation and our first parents? How would you change it to your own version?

CHAPTER 4

GOD

At the very core of the previous chapters – "The Big Picture", "Truth and Faith", and "Evolution" – is my belief in God as the creator. This chapter addresses my thoughts *about* God. First, he gave us the prophets and signs described in the Old Testament. Second, he sent his own son, Jesus Christ, to live with us, teach us, and sacrifice himself for humanity's sake, dying on the cross of salvation. Third, God continually sends us his Holy Spirit to guide us. From those sources, we can learn and understand a lot, but not all, about God. There are still astounding mysteries that are beyond our human comprehension.

> *Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can know the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God, and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus does not belong to God. This is the spirit of the antichrist that, as you heard, is to come, but in fact is already in the world. You belong to God, children, and you have conquered them, for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They belong to the world; accordingly, their teaching belongs to the world, and the world listens to them. We belong to God, and anyone who knows God listens to us, while anyone who does not belong to God refuses to hear us. This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit.* (I John 4:1-6)

GOD EXPLAINED

I've come to know God the Father as the creator and source of our existence. All three persons of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – exist as one from before the beginning of time (the Big Bang) through all eternity. They each participated in creation in their own way. Even though all three existed, the Son and the Spirit took on separate meanings with the conception of Jesus in the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Son and Spirit were known and expressed in the Old Testament by the prophets, but not understood as we have come to know them in the New Testament.

It's interesting to think about what God was like before the beginning of creation as we know it. God existed before the beginning of time and was the cause, source, and power that created all physical existence in the entire universe and put it into motion. But we humans understand the concept of time in our own limited way, beginning at the moment of the Big Bang. Before physical existence, there was no measure of time, so we can't put a measure on God's existence.

What was God like before creation of the universe? We don't know when or how, but at some point God created angels to share his existence. They are pure spirits; they have lives and intellects without the limitations of a physical body. In order to allow them independence, instead of just being slaves or mere puppets, God gave them an intellect and freedom of will. They weren't compelled by God, but could discern and decide for themselves. Notoriously, the angel Lucifer/Satan, who wanted to be on the same level as God, and his followers used their freedom of choice to turn away from God and all his goodness. The Bible tells us that their rebellion caused them to be cast out of heaven and separated from God.

In general, I accept the theories of the Big Bang and the formation of the universe. Modern instruments enhanced by computer analysis can look back eons, but these theories are based only on observed and measured characteristics through the laws of physics as we know them. They cannot explain the why of our origins or even the exact how. That's where God comes in.

Think about it. Presuming all the laws of nature – biology, physics, chemistry, etc. – are universally true and existed from the beginning, an undefined singularity became the source of all energy and mass that exists in the universe. How could that be? All the elements of the periodic table had

to come from that one source so the atomic structure of all existence had to be in place before the Big Bang. Something came from nothing but massive energy focused on that single source. So what was the source of that energy and focus? How did it get there when nothing else existed? There had to be a creator, an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient creator.

God is the source and creator of that singularity. He shaped everything in his intellect and supplied the energy to make it happen. In so doing, he exists in all of his creation, and is a part of us as we are a part of him. We would not exist without him and would cease to exist if he stopped supporting us. That's God the Father, in my thinking.

God the Son, in the form of Jesus Christ, is our savior, judge, and king. He was foreshadowed in the Old Testament through God's own revelation to the prophets. From that standpoint, we have only known God the Son in the Judeo-Christian heritage for the last few thousand years, but that doesn't mean he didn't previously exist. The Son has been directly involved with all of creation and particularly with the creation of mankind. He is the model of our being, we were created like him. He has been personally involved with every human being that has ever existed.

More so, Jesus came to save us, to redeem us, to pay the price for the errors and wrongs that we humans, all humans throughout time, commit. Without Jesus' sacrifice, we could not have been saved because we would otherwise follow Satan. God's plan (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) was and is always for all humans to have the opportunity to join in his life more fully in heaven. God also gave us free will to choose our own pathways but too many times our choices obscure God's plan. To help us get back on the right path, he had to intervene, so God sent us his Son, Jesus Christ.

Catholics firmly believe in the real presence of Christ, both in physical body and spiritual nature, in the Holy Eucharist. Through the miracle of transubstantiation, the bread and wine offered at Mass maintain their physical appearance but the whole substance of each becomes Christ's body and blood. Hence, the real Son of God, in the form of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist, is physically and spiritually present to us here and now. Every single day the body and blood of Christ is consumed by those "called to the supper of the Lamb." Through this holy sacrament, Christ becomes human again in all of the people who receive him; we become the body of Christ.

Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and was buried. If, as many believe, there is no life after death, then he was gone forever. But for those who

believe in life after death, Jesus's resurrection was the answer we were looking for; he conquered death. He still had/has a real body, but it was/is now beatified and no longer limited by the bounds of the human flesh. His body is supernatural. That allows him to be fully present in the Holy Eucharist and in his people everywhere, all at once, now and forever.

I also believe that Jesus Christ is the light that we hear so prominently mentioned in peoples' near-death experiences. He is that light we are drawn toward. Once there in his presence, he is our savior and our judge, the very gate to heaven. We can only pass into heaven through him.

God the Holy Spirit has always been the least understood. As I've prayed, here's what I've felt: The Holy Spirit is the entire government of creation and humanity, providing the legislation, education, health, inspiration, and military might. The Holy Spirit provides for our knowledge of all things, temporal and spiritual. It is the intellect of God, and we are all part of that intellect as it is part of us. The Holy Spirit provides the laws of nature and all of creation. It is the source of knowledge for our sciences, the inspiration of all of the arts.

Another thought is that the Holy Spirit is the form of God that is present to each and every one of us who has ever existed. When we pray, the Spirit is listening. When we love or hate or whatever we do, the Spirit is watching. The Spirit is our motivator and teacher. The Spirit knows everything about us; what we have done, even what we have thought.

The Holy Spirit is the military in the constant and universal battle with Satan and all evil. It provides our spiritual knowledge and faith to resist the powers of Satan. The Spirit sends angels to guide and protect us. When we say the prayer to St. Michael, the Archangel, we are asking for the Spirit's intervention on our behalf through the presence of this powerful angel:

> *St. Michael, the Archangel, defend us in the battle. Be our protection against the malice and snares of the devil. We humbly beseech God to command him, and do thou Heavenly Host by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits that roam about the world, seeking the ruin of souls.*

CONSIDERATION: How would you describe God? Do you understand him as three persons in one God? How would you describe your relationship to God? Do you think God is personally involved in each of our lives?

GOD *IS* LOVE

> *The First Commandment compels us to love God above all other gods, be they deities or money or anything else that could prevent us from loving God completely. Jesus described the twofold commandment of love: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Matthew 22:37-39)

Christ was the purest and most complete example of God's love for us, especially for the poor, the sick, and the lowly.

God alone is the source, the cause, and the goal of love. All love that we can know or imagine has its origin in God. To live with him for eternity in heaven is the ultimate goal of our love but it is only possible for us as a gift of his love.

God created all life as we know it and loved us all so much that, when we had gone far from his love, he gave us his own son for our sake. Jesus loved everyone he touched, even those who rejected him, persecuted him, and ultimately crucified him. Some of his last words as he was nailed to the cross were, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34).

So, by word and action, God has shown his love through all of creation and time. It is his love that sustains us. It is his love that we mirror when we love.

Unfortunately, the antithesis of God exists in Satan and all his followers. Satan is the source of all that is opposed to love – hate, violence, lust, greed, selfishness, pride, etc. Satan chose to love himself more than God and became the personification of evil. He has a compulsion to take all others to himself and literally to hell.

We have to choose between God and Satan. How can that be so hard? Love versus hate. Why would we; how could we make the wrong choice? Because God gave us free will and because Satan confuses us, leads us to reject God, and then opens the door to all kinds of evil. Satan is deceitful, turning his lies into what we see as truths. We begin with small steps and

then suddenly find that we have walked far from our loving God and into Satan's lair.

We have to admit and understand that God and Satan do exist so that we can make the correct distinction in our choices. We must reject Satan and all his temptations. We need to acknowledge God as our source and our goal. Then, we can be open to God's love in our lives and to love him in return.

CONSIDERATION: Think about the need for love in your life. Where does it come from? How can you grow in love? What is standing in the way? How can you get around it?

THE REAL ROYAL FAMILY

Life with heavenly treasures and the promise of eternal joy, peace, and love are everyday features of the real royal family, those who live fully in the family of God. We are all created with the call to be God's family. Many answer that call, live that faith, and enjoy its treasures. Unfortunately, many others don't and miss out on this heritage. It has always been that way since the beginning of the human race. God offers adoption into this family, but not all accept the offer.

Today's royal families trace their heritages back centuries. They hold firmly to the lines of succession from father/mother to son/daughter. They live in palaces and surround themselves with earthly treasures and wealth. They rule over their people in some form and are revered.

God's royal family traces its heritage back thousands of years to the origin of the human family and through the long succession of the ancient kings and prophets. (See Matthew 1:1 for a description of Jesus's own genealogy.) Throughout the Old Testament, God supported his people in miraculous ways and continually sent leaders and messengers to his people to show them the way to life in faith. Just as in current times, his people wandered in and out of that faith, regularly in need of the messengers from God to lead them back.

To some extent, God's chosen people have lived in palaces. The Church is no slouch when it comes to ornate facilities, treasures, and wealth. But the real royal family and the treasures of God are not found in ornate facilities nor do they necessarily hold wealth or power. The real treasures of life are found in the heart and soul when they are attuned to God. We are *all* called to be God's people, regardless of bloodline, wealth, or status.

I'm speaking primarily of those who live in concert with the core of the Catholic faith, although it is not theirs exclusively because God has opened the doors of faith to all humankind. Yet, it is by leading daily life as a devoted Catholic that a person consistently enjoys the treasures of God-given graces. The closer one is to the fullness of the Catholic life, the more one receives and enjoys those treasures. This is because God's graces flow constantly through the life, liturgy, prayers, and services of those who choose to participate in these mysteries. The gift of becoming a member of God's royal family was fully accomplished in Jesus Christ; God sent his own son to be our personal leader and messenger. More than that, he gave

us the privilege of enjoying his very presence in our lives every day through the gifts of his holy Church. And what a treasure it is to be part of this holy royal family.

Jesus established the Church for all people as the continuation of his life on earth when he said, "And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) He sent the Holy Spirit to his apostles on Pentecost and continues to do so to guide, support, and protect his Church. More wonderfully, **we** are his Church, the recipients of the life of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus gives us his continuing life (graces) through the liturgies and sacraments (the treasures) of the Church.

In Baptism, we are called to become members of this holy family of God in faith. We become "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own." (I Peter 2:9)

In the Mass and Eucharist we receive the very person of Christ to be our nourishment for our life of faith. Throughout the Mass we are nourished by the word of God. We are part of the sacrifice in offering our own prayers and participation. We truly become one with Christ as he becomes one with us.

In the sacrament of Confirmation we receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit that was given to the apostles at Pentecost. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

> *The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations.* (1831)

We receive God's forgiveness for our sins and offenses, what we have done and what we have failed to do, through the sacrament of Penance. In confession we can reconcile ourselves with God and renew our spiritual life which was harmed by our sins. What a great gift of grace, a real treasure.

In Anointing of the Sick, those who are ill and in special need of God's grace are given Christ's own blessings that he passes down through his Church for our physical healing. It can bring about the recovery from

physical illnesses, but it's really a healing for the soul to assist it in meeting the challenges of the physical illness. As humans, we will suffer sickness, decline and death. Those we cannot prevent. But we can be better prepared for the challenges that face us in suffering and death through God's grace in this sacrament. Also, many parishes have healing ministries that are available for those needing this kind of support.

Throughout the centuries, men have been called to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders and be ordained to the many ministries of the priesthood to serve God's royal family. From the early years of the papacy, the popes have referred to their role as "the servant of the servants of God." While in recent years, the priesthood has come under fire for the human failings of men, the priesthood is still the means and method of Christ's own saving mysteries.

While women cannot be ordained to the priesthood (in the Catholic Church), those who answer God's special call can take vows and enter one of many religious orders. They, as did our Holy Mother Mary before them, say "yes" to serve God, his Church, and people in many ways. Blessed Mother Teresa, for example, made her solemn vows with the Sisters of Loreto in 1937. She taught school in Calcutta, India for many years before turning her attention to caring for the poor and sick. In 1950 she received Vatican approval to establish the Missionaries of Charity. Women religious have been a never-ending gift to God's people.

The seventh of God's treasures is the sacrament of Matrimony. The blessings of a sanctified marriage enable a man and woman to become one with each other and with God. There is no greater gift of God than to be in a loving family. This is our heritage and our future.

These are all treasures of the royal family of the Catholic Church and are available to anyone who chooses to become part of this family.

CONSIDERATION: Think about the real treasures that you seek. Are they material or spiritual?

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

> *What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, "Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep." I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.* (Luke 15:4-7)

> What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray. In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost. (Matthew 18:12-14)

This is not the parable for our "lost sheep," our beloved relatives and friends who have left the flock for their own reasons. That's the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32.

There are three points of view in this parable – the shepherd, the ninety-nine in the safe flock, and the one lost sheep.

The owner/shepherd is akin to God, who would make sure the ninety-nine are safe, then leave to find and save the one lost sheep and come home rejoicing for having saved it. From this perspective, we know God will do anything to save every one of us.

The second point of view is as one of the ninety-nine who are safe and just where they should be. It's not about them, although we can probably better identify with them. Rationally, most would advise the shepherd to stay with the flock and protect the remaining ninety-nine sheep rather than risk losing them while searching for the lost one. But with God as our shepherd, we can be assured he will go after every one of his lost sheep.

In the end, this parable is about the lost sheep and how we relate to that point of view. Those who are the marginalized of society can readily identify with the lost sheep. They may have been distracted and followed their dreams away from the flock and then found themselves lost or their absence unnoticed as the flock moves on. Or they may be handicapped or victims of violence, accident, or disaster. They may be homeless or helpless or hopeless. They may be mentally ill or depressed. They may be orphans or foster children or from dysfunctional families. If you were any one of those, you would want desperately for someone to find and save you, to take you home and love you. From that perspective, we would greatly rejoice with the good shepherd for having been found and saved.

Sin makes each of us a lost sheep in a manner similar to the disadvantaged. Sin marginalizes us; it distracts us, causing us to lose our way when the flock moves on. Our souls, minds and bodies decline from the harmful effects of sin; we become hopeless. We are in need of the good shepherd and, in fact, we are the object of his search.

Here my version of the parable. It is fiction, but based on all-too-frequent news headlines:

> Your 30-year-old daughter has three children, two in grade school and a 4-year-old special-needs daughter at home. That child is the apple of your eye and gives you great joy when you are together. After lunch, the little one is put in her room for a nap. Your daughter goes to work in the kitchen when the phone rings. It is a good friend she hasn't heard from in a while, so they have a great time catching up. She hangs up the phone and goes to check on her daughter, but the child is gone. Your daughter frantically searches the house and discovers the back door is ajar. She looks outside in the yard, calling your granddaughter's name. "Charlotte! Charlotte, where are you?" She calls you and you rush over to help. You both search the neighborhood, knocking on doors, looking over fences, but do not find her anywhere. The police are called and a larger search effort gets underway. The sheriff takes you aside and mentions a local teenage boy who has been in trouble with the law, even questioned about – but not arrested for – being a possible abuser of another, younger child. Your heart races with dread.

> There is a playground a block from your daughter's home where you often take the kids. Your little granddaughter loves the swings. That's a logical place to look, but she's not there. There's a creek that runs along the far side of the park and it's swollen from winter rains, rushing and dirty. The creek goes down into a ravine and wooded area. She could be anywhere. The search goes on through the afternoon and into the evening. The weather turns and now it is windy and raining. It is getting dark, and the search may have to be called off for the night.
>
> At this point, you would do anything, give anything, pay any price to bring the child home safely. But you don't know whether she's lost in the woods, washed down the creek, or abducted. All you can do is hope and pray that the searchers will find her safe.

Unfortunately, stories like that are often on the evening news. You can see the desperation in the eyes and faces of the families and searchers. Many of these real stories don't end with good outcomes. Some children are never found. (My imaginary story ends happily with the little girl being found unharmed, sleeping with the neighbor's dog in its doghouse.)

Perhaps God feels similar desperation about his lost ones. In fact, he gave his all, his own son, his very life to save us, his children. Maybe now we can relate to the anxiety of the shepherd over his lost sheep and the extent God will go to save us.

We Catholics have a common prayer that seems very appropriate for all of the "lost sheep":

> *Oh, my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of your mercy.*

CONSIDERATION: Are you lost? If so, what's your story? Be assured that God, the good shepherd, is looking for you.

THE WALLS THAT BLIND US

It's generally understood that we learn from experience. As a child, we learn from our interactions with parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. We learn to recognize people, animals, toys, and the reality of our daily lives. We learn to speak, to understand the meanings of words, to read, to count, and how to communicate. We use our imaginations and live vicariously through books, TV, internet, and movies. We continue this learning at home, school, play, and from relationships. Still, our knowledge at any point in our development, especially the early years, is largely limited to what we have actually experienced ourselves.

As we mature, we learn to think for ourselves and not just repeat what is told or shown to us. We use reasoning and logic to develop knowledge that goes beyond our direct experience.

How can we know what we haven't experienced? Much of what we "know" as reality comes from the use of our intellect, our ability to observe and reason and learn relationships that go beyond our direct experience. Science and mathematics are particular examples. The created environment around us – cities, transportation, products, and entertainment – is the result of someone else's knowledge put to work. Theoretically, every one of us has the ability to learn and know just as much as any one of the many other people who have that knowledge.

Higher levels of knowledge are developed by greater minds than our own and passed down to us through their writings. The ancient philosophers, the great geniuses, the creative inventors, and the incredible scientists have written down their observations, experiences and theories, and those writings have been validated by more study and scrutiny from peers and followers. We discover new knowledge every day with the help of research and technological advances. For example, I'll never understand Einstein's Theory of Relativity, but I accept it as knowledge.

Conversely, a child living in poverty and hunger has limited experiences other than just trying to survive. Some poor children can't go beyond the knowledge given to them by parents and peers. It's as if there were walls around them restricting their opportunities. Those invisible walls keep them from knowing about things beyond the walls.

To varying degrees, we all are hampered by invisible walls limiting our knowledge. Some walls we erect with our own fear or closed mindedness. So, clearly, our knowledge can be limited by our own choices. We also have the power to tear down those walls or create doorways that will let us access more knowledge of God and the world he created. We just have to make the effort.

We really can know a great deal about God and how he relates to our lives, but we can also choose not to know him. Many people, for example, argue that God doesn't exist. The walls in their lives are high and solid and they do not allow for the possibility of doorways. It's a shame because there are so many grand components to our physical environment – oceans, mountains, sky, stars, weather, plants, animals – that show the evidence of a powerful and wise God. And spiritual knowledge of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is life giving and affirming.

CONSIDERATION: What walls have you built that limit your knowledge of the reality of God? What doors do you want to open? Which do you want to keep closed? Why?

GOD ISN'T CATHOLIC

Nor Protestant, nor Muslim, nor Jew, nor Hindu, nor Buddhist, God is universal! We may think he's only on our side, whichever side that is, but he's on everyone's side. He is present to everyone; the relationship is determined by each person's response to God regardless of chosen religion or none at all.

That doesn't mean it doesn't make any difference. All religions should be a pathway to God and, the better the pathway, the better the relationship with God. Authentic religion has the purpose of providing that pathway. If that's not its purpose, it's not authentic to God. The more authentic the religion is to God, the better the pathway.

I'm writing my thoughts from the Catholic point of view. That may or may not be more valid than others, but its core is totally authentic to God as can best be determined by human efforts. We're all short of perfection. If any other religion brings people to a better, more complete relationship with God, I'm sure that he's an instrumental part of that process.

There are two other pathways in common use: pathways that ignore God or that lead to Satan. I believe that strictly secular pathways are ignorant of God at best or perhaps the result of following Satan's intervention. Certainly, it seems too many are following Satan's pathways.

The primary key to any and all of the pathways to God is love. Love for God and love for others, whatever the religion chosen or ignored. One can seem to be on an authentic pathway, but without love, they are not following it. Satan is the counterpoint to love and leads people away from love. Even if a person is not apparently on a pathway to God, they can still get there through love.

The other key element is personal choice. None of the religions in the world can save anyone who chooses to follow Satan. Perhaps choosing to be neutral or secular or ignorant may be due to following Satan away from God. It's a free choice that anyone can make and follow; it just won't lead to God.

Normally, choice is driven by knowledge. One usually chooses what one knows, but one can also choose to ignore or even prevent knowledge. One can choose a secular pathway and block all knowledge of God. The knowledge may be readily available, but it is ignored or denied.

I'm certain that the Catholic Church is the pathway to that knowledge, and the right choice. I'm just as certain that most of my Protestant or Muslim or Buddhist brothers and sisters are just as certain that their chosen pathway is authentic. That may be so because the end result is between the person and God. Religion is a pathway, a lifestyle, a choice; the objective is God.

CONSIDERATION: What do you think about the role of religion in one's life? Do you think one religion is as good as another? What's the real objective?

CHAPTER 5

SATAN

The counterpart to belief in God is belief in Satan, the source of all evil in the world. To the extent that evil is caused by man's choices, Satan is behind them. So, in order to understand "The Big Picture," we have to understand Satan's presence and role in the outcome.

SATAN DEFINED

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* describes Satan as follows:

> *Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy. Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called "Satan" or the "devil." The Church teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God: "The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing."* (391)

Referring to the phrase in the *Our Father*, "but deliver us from evil," the CCC says:

> *In this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. The devil is the one who throws himself across God's plan and his work of salvation accomplished in Christ.* (2851)

Satan and his followers were created by God as angels. These angels fell from grace when they choose to "radically and irrevocably reject God" (392). Why would they do that and why God allow it? If God had created angels without intellect and free will, they would have been slaves, eunuchs, puppets, toys. Without free choice, they could not have fallen away. They chose it out of pride and selfishness.

Lucifer was/is a most intelligent and powerful angel. Lucifer envied God and challenged him in an attempt to make himself a god. In doing so, he rejected God and God's purpose. In return, God banished Lucifer and his followers from heaven and sent them to the place we know as hell. When God created the universe and humankind, Satan was able to intervene because God created humans also with free will and choice. Satan successfully tempted Adam and Eve into the first sin and to this day he entices each of us to choose to offend and/or reject God even in seemingly insignificant ways. Satan is all about building his own kingdom apart from God and recruiting others to join him there. Satan's desire for you is not love. You must resist

him, especially at the moments following your death when he will make a last effort for your soul.

The good news is that Satan, though powerful and evil, is still only a creature of God. As we are also creatures of God, created in his image, we have the free will to choose between God and Satan. Choose God.

CONSIDERATION: Do you believe in Satan? Why or why not? How do you describe Satan?

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH SATAN

One day I was on the Internet and came across a blog with this explanation of Satan:

> *To achieve its goals, Satan uses refined, superhuman skills by confusing and creating structures, in which the divine order is turned on its head, from the good to the evil and evil seems to be for the good, virtue is vice and vice virtue, sound doctrine a heresy, and heresy to sound doctrine.* (*The Eponymous Flower*)

We are all, every one of us including Christ himself, subject to the direct temptation of Satan. Alone we are unable to resist his powers; only God has more power. If we are influenced by Satan to disengage ourselves from God, we are caught in Satan's web. Once that happens, as the blog stated, our thinking is tainted with Satan's perspective so that good is evil and evil is good; virtue is vice and vice is virtue; sound doctrine is a heresy and heresy is sound. We ignore and/or deny God, accept secular and relative values, and resist any efforts to conversion.

Satan builds a wall of opposition within us to protect his position. And he does all of this with our own unconscious acceptance. Satan is the great deceiver and disguises himself in many ways so we don't directly recognize him. He's able to infiltrate our minds and distract us with all kinds of thoughts and actions that take us off of the right path and onto the road toward destruction and condemnation. He can position himself intellectually in front of us, between us and God. His pathway is easy, attractive, and encouraging; it promises that all desires will be fulfilled.

We are all sinners, as even Pope Francis has described himself. What is different is that some accept this reality and seek God's mercy while others are sufficiently entrapped to deny God an opportunity for conversion. Even the most obvious or least intrusive conversion is rejected.

When we deny God's existence, we also deny the existence and influence of Satan. And that's just what he wants us to do. No one wants to accept the possibility that we are acting under the influence of Satan. So, in order to avoid that possibility we simply deny that the Evil One exists, making his power over us stronger.

But no one is all wrong or bad any more than no one is right or good all the time. Everyone is right and good to the extent that they do the right things and have love and compassion for others. Every good act is through the grace of God.

The good news is that God is always with us, each and every one of us, and is eager to assist us in becoming free from Satan's grip. God is only a breath away. We just have to accept God's help. We need to turn to God and be open to his love. Then, we can be freed from Satan's trap. That doesn't mean we're free from evil's temptations, but that we are armed with the strength of God to resist Satan. Our eyes, minds, and hearts will open to seeing and knowing that God exists in everyone and only God can provide the peace and love we so desire.

CONSIDERATION: How would you describe your relationship with Satan? Where do you see his influence most clearly in your life and in humankind?

EXPLAINING THE BAD THINGS ON THE EVENING NEWS

News is about the good and the bad things happening in our communities and around the world. I appreciate the good-news items and feel compassion for all those suffering from natural disasters, but my focus here is on human violence against one another. Why are war, terrorism, murder, violence, and abuse happening? People have different explanations, but only a one-word answer is needed – Satan.

Anyone with faith in God must also accept that there is a powerful opposite force in human nature in the form of Satan and his allies. Yet, few seem to express concern about this. It is not explained in any contemporary speeches, writings, or sermons that I've encountered. All I hear are the benefits of belief in God, but nothing about the negative effects of Satan. The explanations are all in human social and cultural terms. They all miss the real point: Satan is at the very core of it all.

Satan has been at the core of human life since the fall of Adam and Eve. That maybe a literary explanation, but the truth of it is certain. Satan has always been a negative force in humanity. Evil is documented in every form of study of ancient civilizations. War and violence have always been with us. There have been thousands of examples of extreme murders, violence, ethnic cleansing, etc. in societies around the world throughout history. Recent events just make it more real to us.

It's not that we don't know about Satan and hell. I'm not a biblical scholar, but a short review of Matthew's Gospel includes a number of direct references to Satan and his works. Similar accounts are punctuated in the other gospels and the rest of the New Testament. The first example that I attribute directly to Satan, although the text doesn't, is Matthew 2:16, in which Herod "became furious (about the Magi not coming back to tell him where the infant Jesus was to be found) and ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the Magi." Who else but Satan could convince a political leader to massacre so many innocent children just to eliminate the God child, the new born king? Satan didn't want God's son to set foot on earth.

Behind every act of human violence is the underlying motivation of Satan. He is the antithesis of love; he hates it and does everything he can to interfere with it. Why? Because love is from God. So, when you watch, read, or listen to the evening news, look into the eyes of the perpetrator of violence and you'll see Satan, the root of all evil.

CONSIDERATION: Do you see a relationship between bad news reports and Satan? If not, how would you explain the reason for them? Why are some people so hateful?

IMMORALITY LEADS TO SUFFERING

If you look at the big picture, from God to Satan and everything in between, you will see the connection between Satan, sin, and suffering.

I see all suffering as a spiritual consequence, as well as a physical, emotional, and mental burden on society. I see a connection between our sinful society and the storms that ravage the world. I see a connection between the sinful nature of terrorists and the millions of people who are entangled in violence and war and those forced to seek safety in refugee camps. I see a connection between the sins of people and much of the suffering from illnesses, accidents, and hardships.

God is the source and goal of all peace and tranquility. By his very nature, God could punish but doesn't; suffering is the result of our collective sinful nature. God allows suffering from all sources – physical, mental, spiritual, economic – as a means to offset our sinful nature. In order for us to be ultimately in the very presence of God's eternal salvation, we must overcome the faults in our souls. That is accomplished in several ways, one of which is suffering.

The antidote to suffering is to bring ourselves and our societies to God. How do we do that? Conversion is the first step toward peace. That doesn't necessarily mean becoming Catholic, but it does mean everyone must turn away from Satan and toward God. Once we have turned toward God, we need to acknowledge his presence in our lives and learn to love him. Directly associated with loving God is love for others. If those two steps were accomplished by the majority of people, we would all be at peace. We can go further by adding virtuous works of charity and, of course, giving our lives to God in prayer, penance, and suffering as atonement for our failings will complete the effort.

Suffering is a part of our own pathway to heaven. We must atone for all our sins and other shortcomings before we can enter heaven. Physical suffering is a means to spiritual cleansing, particularly if it is accepted as a part of our atonement. And it may be for others as well because accepting suffering on the behalf of others' spiritual needs is a virtue of charity.

Bottom line: Until we all convert to God and away from Satan, we will continue to suffer.

CONSIDERATION: How do you see the connection between Satan, sin, and suffering?

GOOD vs. EVIL = GOD vs. SATAN

As I ponder my own faults and failings, I look for the real root of the issues and come to the following picture: If all virtues are placed on the right and all vices on the left, you would see behind them the very presence of God on the right and Satan on the left. Every virtuous thing you do brings you closer to God and every bad thing you do brings you closer to Satan.

It seems that good people, including me, adopt bad behaviors and characteristics not because we want to be bad, but because the things we are doing seem good or desirable. We seek pleasure and satisfaction, so Satan puts temptation in front of us as good, at least at that moment. It wouldn't work if Satan tried to sell us on something that we saw as wrong or harmful so he twists the truth and convinces us that vice is good.

For example, recent news carried the trial of a murderer. After he was found guilty, he tried to justify his horrible actions by explaining that he did it for his girlfriend, who wanted those innocent people killed for some reason that seemed necessary to her. His "good" deed meant violent death for an innocent family.

God is close to each and every one of us, regardless of our own attitude and relationship with him. The problem is that, if we leave enough distance between ourselves and God, Satan will come between us. If we allow him to stay, he'll build a wall between us and God. So, the key for us is to forcefully clear Satan out and not allow him to get established around us. We've got to constantly make that effort and then to get ourselves close to God. We do that in our choices, our actions and our thoughts.

CONSIDERATION: How do you see the relationship between good and evil? Do you see God and Satan in these actions? Why or why not?

CONFUSING, FRUSTRATING, AND DEPRAVED

So, what's hell like? In the Bible, it's described as "the fires of hell" and a place of "wailing and gnashing of teeth." It's always been understood as a place of eternal pain and suffering. I would say it also has aspects of confusion, frustration, and depravity. Confusing because it goes against all rationality; we can't understand it. Frustrating because we can't escape it or make it better; we've got to live with it. Depraved because some of the souls there are not only suffering themselves, but they are assisting in Satan's efforts to bring more suffering to others.

Unfortunately, that's a lot like some places on earth. There are a lot of people who suffer at the hands of others. Murder, violence, abuse, and other disgusting behaviors are not uncommon. All are characteristics of hell, and it's closer than we realize. For some, it will be a very short step through death.

You don't want to be there and I pray that you won't. Purgatory won't be fun, but the promise of heaven makes it better than the hellish alternative. God will judge your heart, so no matter what else you do, keep it ready for that moment of death and judgment. Your eternal outcome is already within you.

CONSIDERATION: Have you ever felt like you were in the presence of Satan? Describe it, analyze it. What were the consequences?

CHAPTER 6

SOUL AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

Moving from "The Big Picture" to the more personal, I'll discuss my views on the nature of our being, specifically our souls. It's what sets us apart from all of the other beings in God's creation and will give us life after death for all eternity. So we need to think carefully about our soul and spiritual life.

OUR LIFE IN GOD AND GOD IN OUR LIFE

One night on TV in December 2004, political pundit and talk-show host Bill O'Reilly was interviewing a minister/writer of a very popular book about life relative to God and asked him, "Do you really believe in a micro-managing God who looks at every detail of your life?" The gentleman answered, "Absolutely. It's written in the Bible that God counts every hair on your head."

How can that be? What is God really like? We can best answer those questions by looking at our own lives.

Our lives are at once both physical and spiritual. The physical side, our body, is one of size and shape, health and sickness, physical attributes, strengths and weaknesses, skills and handicaps. It's the realm of biology and medicine. We need water, food, air, and sunshine to live.

Our spiritual life, our soul, is where our memory, experiences, knowledge, and choices reside. It is the realm of psychology, psychiatry, and philosophy as well as theology, the study of God. Our hopes and fears, our love and our sadness abide in our spiritual life. Just as our body needs nourishment to live, our soul needs spiritual nourishment to be alive and healthy. It can grow and do wonderful things for us, but it is also the place for our temptations and failures, our sins and negligence. And we, in our very soul, will live through and after death, forever.

It's in the soul that we are like God and he like us. God is the supernatural soul, and the contrary Satan is the very soul of all evil. Our souls are in constant touch with both God and Satan, just as we live our lives with our families and colleagues. Every action in our lives is a choice influenced by our relationship to these coexisting yet competing powers. We strive for virtue, but sometimes choose vice. The ultimate measure of each life is the sum and balance of how one has lived. Eternal life will be determined by that balance of good and evil in our lives.

CONSIDERATION: Do you believe each one of us has a spiritual life? Why or why not? If you don't, how do you understand the mental side of our lives? Is it all just a coincidental interchange of biological activities in our brain? How does that explain our intellectual abilities and free will?

SPIRITUAL LIFE

We are at once both physical and spiritual, living fully in both worlds. Our physical life is obvious, but the spiritual life is known and experienced in different ways. Our thoughts are the most evident example, but not the only one. Our thoughts are more than just electrochemical, neurological activity because we have control over them. We have choices in how and what to think. Purely physical activity doesn't have a choice – it just happens according to its nature.

This is because we are created in the image and likeness of God in the spiritual sense and, to some extent, the physical sense. Jesus Christ was certainly both physical as human and spiritual as God. But, did Jesus assume our human form or was our human form modeled on Jesus before the creation of man? The later makes more sense to me and better explains our nature.

Our spiritual life remains within and is limited by our physical being until the death of our body when it's released from its physical constraints. In a similar manner, our spiritual life can go beyond our physical limits with such disciplines as prayer and meditation. We really can communicate with God and, to some extent, other spiritual beings. We simply must exercise our spiritual life by initiating our thoughts and intentions to that level.

Conversely, we can exercise our spiritual life in a negative manner, such as with ill will and immoral thoughts. In other words, much of our spiritual life is either good or bad, right or wrong as measured by moral values and determined by our own choices and actions.

Similarly, people who have lived and already died still have very real spiritual lives. In the book, *Get Us Out Of Here!!*, Maria Simma described being visited by souls in purgatory for more than 63 years of her life. She experienced both the sights and sounds of these souls and carried on conversations as we do. In answer to the question, "Do the poor souls have bodies?" Simma said, "They say that they don't notice that they don't have their body with them. They have a transfigured body and it can take on the form of a healed and dressed human body."

In the book, *Hungry Souls*, the author Gerard J.M. van den Aardweg describes exhibits in a small church in Rome, the Little Purgatory Museum that have been burned by the touch of tormented souls in purgatory. These

are very real experiences that testify to life in purgatory, both physical and spiritual.

So, you may ask, are we talking about ghosts? Yes and no. The term "ghosts" is a derogatory, pagan way of describing spiritual life. We think of ghosts in negative ways along with haunted houses and scary stories. That's disrespectful of these real people who have gone before us to purgatory on their journey to heaven. Some humans experience them because they need our help completing their journey through suffering in purgatory. They can only be experienced in personal contact through the grace of God.

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all live in the spiritual world. Because we have a complete spiritual life, we can and do share in Jesus's own life through the Church, especially through the sacraments. The Catholic Church has convincingly established, since its inception by Christ, that his own life is present in the Eucharist and that we, in fact, receive his real body and blood in Communion. This is our spiritual food, nourishment for our spiritual lives. We are also nourished by prayer and meditation, reading and study, sermons and spiritual advice. And we must continue to feed our spiritual life, just as we must feed our physical life, for it to remain healthy and grow.

To carry this further, we experience Christ's life when we pray, learn, and act on his direction. Because his life is eternal without limit of time, we can experience his entire life, including his own sacrifice and death. Similarly, we share responsibility for his capture, judgment, torture, and death along with the Roman and Jewish leaders who carried them out. We can be present, in a spiritual sense, at those events while praying and meditating on the Rosary and Stations of the Cross.

Because the angels and saints share this life in the spiritual world, we can also interact with them through prayer and meditation. We can literally join the "communion of saints" in our own lives, here and now. The Church has always taught that we can pray to our Holy Mother Mary, our patron saints, and special saints for special purposes or causes. We ask that they intercede on our behalf so that God may provide the support and direction we need in this life and the next.

Likewise, the Church has always taught that we can and should pray for our departed loved ones to be blessed with the fullness of heaven sooner than later. We believe that, if they have died in grace, God will preserve their lives and prepare them for eventual and eternal life in heaven. Our prayers

seek intercession with God on their behalf. We believe that this is effective and will support our loved ones as they progress toward the fullness of life with God in heaven.

The ultimate goal of our spiritual lives is to pass through this earthly existence cleanly with a peaceful death and then be ushered into eternal salvation. That's a choice we have. Every day we take actions that affect that choice: to live and nourish our spiritual life or to allow it to die and risk the very goal of its existence.

CONSIDERATION: This is a big step in understanding spiritual life. What's the truth? How can you know? How do you understand spiritual life? Why do you agree or disagree with this discussion of spiritual life?

OUR SOUL IS SUBCONSCIOUS

We experience life in both conscious and subconscious states. The most obvious subconscious elements are physical actions and reactions that are totally under the body's own mechanisms, such as breathing or experiencing hunger or dreaming. Fear and courage, greed and charity, love and hate, anger and joy are also part of the subconscious. They well up in us under different circumstances and seem to come without specific rational intent. An example is choking up and coming to tears when thinking about a lost loved one or seeing a touching film. Some of these subconscious elements even come into play against our strongest conscious efforts, such as trying to quit an addiction to smoking or drugs, and require external control beyond our own efforts.

Our soul is our subconscious self; it underlies our consciousness. That aligns with the descriptions provided by Maria Simma, whose experiences of speaking with souls in purgatory are documented in the book *Get Us Out Of Here!!*. Simma says we have three components of our being – physical, mental, and spiritual. Our mental component is conscious and our spiritual component is subconscious, which is where our experiences with the spiritual world take place. Then we raise it to the conscious level with our minds – intellect and will – where we can process it.

Our subconscious life is where our identity exists; that's who we are. Our conscious self is responding to the subconscious in our character. That helps me better understand some of the confusing identity issues we see in the media, such as the woman who said she identifies as black although she is physically white, or the people who have gender identities that differ from their biological identities.

It's mentioned a number of times in the Bible that Satan or some sort of demons possessed different people. It's because they left their subconscious life open to Satan's interaction by not consciously and continually defending themselves against him and his temptations. Our morality exists in the interplay between our conscious and subconscious self. That's why we need to purposely develop a spiritual life and a relationship with God, so we don't leave our innermost self vulnerable to Satan's influence. That's why prayer is so important.

That's also why we need quiet time in our prayers, to allow us to hear God's words and guidance as well as the communications from others in the

spiritual realm. Otherwise, our conscious mind can drown out the wisdom of our subconscious. That's also why we can be very creative in the quiet times, such as when we're near sleep. Our conscious mind is letting go while our subconscious is still awake and active.

Unfortunately, that's also where Satan's domain exists around us. If we aren't consciously saying "no," Satan and his companions send messages of deceit and evil as temptations that are then picked up by our consciousness. That's why we sin and come to rational conclusions against God's will that we would otherwise reject.

Our subconscious is also where our mental health exists. We see it every night on the news – someone kills or commits suicide or inflicts other violence, and we wonder why a rational person would/could do that. We look for rational answers, but those behaviors are formed in an irrational subconscious.

And that's where hypnosis works. In the entertainment field of hypnosis, when in that state of unconsciousness, the hypnotist puts a humorous suggestion into a person's subconscious mind so he can prompt entertaining actions when the person is "awake." And that's why hypnosis can work on other ingrained habits like smoking or eating; the hypnotist can place controlling suggestions into one's subconscious.

So, in a similar way, both good and evil spirits put suggestions into our subconscious where we act on them, if we choose to, with our intellect and will in our conscious state. But, like the hypnotic suggestions or mental health issues, we may act on those suggestions without proper choice and will.

So, the outcome of our behavior is based on how our conscious intellect and will process what's going on inside of us in our subconscious self. If we have consciously built a strong relationship with God through active religion or prayer or other means, then we will be better able to resist those subconscious temptations. Conversely, if we haven't built a strong relationship with God, we leave our subconscious self open to Satan. And that's what is happening in our society; we've collectively tuned out God and left the doors to Satan wide open.

CONSIDERATION: Do these thoughts help you understand your own soul? Do you nurture your soul with good thoughts and actions or do you leave your subconscious open to temptation?

THE MIND'S EYE

The mind's eye is a very powerful faculty of human life. Problem solving and creativity takes place in the mind's eye. For example, Leonardo da Vinci, like so many great minds, could see the details of his art and inventions in his mind's eye and then put them on canvas or paper or sculpture.

The mind's eye differs from imagination in that it is an expression of intellect; applying knowledge, logic, and creativity to a real subject rather than just conjuring up unreal pictures or words. It is mental imagery.

For example, I'm educated and trained as an engineer. Numerous times I've developed a concept in my mind and then sat down and put it on paper. I once started a business to build a product that I had previously fully developed in great detail in my mind. I've built two houses that I first visualized; I could walk the site and point out where all rooms were when there was nothing but dirt, bushes, and trees around me and no plans on paper.

Many years ago, I read a *Reader's Digest* excerpt of Paul H. Smith's book *The Most Secret Agent.* Smith was an Army officer who worked in special operations, security, and tactical and strategic intelligence. He and a handful of other government personnel were trained in "remote viewing." They would be given brief bits of intelligence about a military target that they had no direct knowledge of and then they would "see" what was going on at those targets. They would literally "see" behind the lines and into those secret facilities. In his book, Smith provided several examples of things he and others "saw" and described and sketched on paper; some of them turned out to be quite accurate when the actual target was documented. The point is they were using their mind's eye to see those targets.

Smith wrote:

> *We learned that human consciousness isn't locked within the physical body. The mind can roam virtually at will across the face of the planet. The fact that science has been unable to explain exactly how remote viewing works may only mean that our understanding of the world is incomplete. There is a real cause, a 'bottom line,' to remote viewing. We don't yet know what that is.*

There are also psychics who express these powers, some believable and some hoaxes. The point is that the human mind's eye truly can see both physical and non-physical things. Unfortunately, the rest of us can't see the same things so we may discredit the seer. We tend to insist on physical reality and anything else may be dismissed as imagination. I'm not arguing for or against psychic powers, just for the very reality and ability of the mind's eye.

The mind's eye, I believe, is the human soul; a real combination of physical and non-physical being. It is the essence of our life within our human bodies as well as the essence of our eternal life after the death of our bodies. Death releases the soul from the body. There are many documented cases of near-death experiences in which people who return to life describe that release and the reality of life outside their bodies after death.

The human soul is created in God's image and is an expression of his life in us. Our life comes from God. Because of this, we can apply our mind's eye to communication with God. This book is a way for you to see what's in my mind's eye.

CONSIDERATION: When you think of your mind's eye, does it help you understand the human soul? Describe your understanding of your mind's eye. How does it work?

THOUGHTS ON *THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED*

The Road Less Traveled is a book by Dr. Morgan Scott Peck that eventually became a bestseller after its initial publication in 1978. Subtitled, *A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, the book explores the author's insights into the relationship between the mind, mental illness, life, and the soul that he developed over years as a practicing psychiatrist. Simply put, the book is about spiritual growth of the human mind.

Peck writes that the human mind is composed of the conscious and the unconscious and that the conscious element makes up only 5 percent of one's mind. He describes the conscious as the decision-maker while the unconscious relates to God and spiritual growth. He doesn't call the unconscious element a soul, but that's how I interpret his premise.

He goes on to attribute much of the condition of the human mind to the unconscious element, which is significantly affected by grace. He describes grace as the power that allows or supports the upward movement of the human mind as compared to the natural downward flow of normal, scientific processes. So, in my words, without grace, the human mind will inevitably degenerate. Peck ascribes grace to the hand of an outside force that nourishes spiritual growth; those with faith know it as God. He says that when we align our free will with God, we become God's agent and a form of his grace to others.

He states that evil is the natural outcome of original sin, specifically calling it laziness or the lack of any effort to improve one's spiritual growth. That laziness is aligned with the devil and leads to rationalization in order to conceal the evil itself. He declares that evil is real and that evil people dismiss it in order to avoid the pain of guilt.

He writes that love is the antithesis of evil. That some people may not extend love if they don't have to doesn't necessarily make them evil. Truly evil people, on the other hand, actively avoid extending love.

All that is consistent with my understanding of the human soul, but I don't think Peck took these concepts to their logical conclusion. That's what I'll try to do; hopefully with grace.

CONSIDERATION: How do you understand your own conscious and unconscious mind? Is it spiritual in nature? What could you do to improve it? If you are interested, you may want to read *The Road Less Traveled*, especially Section IV – Grace.

FREE WILL

Fundamentally, everyone has a free will and can change their mind and behavior at any time. But in reality, that doesn't happen. Instead, a person develops a pretty consistent behavior over time and abides by it within a relatively narrow pattern with few significant changes. It's not that there is no freedom of will or choice, but a person makes choices over the years that establish and remain aligned to certain behaviors that one is unlikely to modify. These ingrained behaviors, habits, characteristics make the person. That is who they are.

Years ago, while I was working at the City of Bellevue, all of the leaders were given a series of psychological tests followed by a series of educational classes based on a clinical theory of behavior. Under that theory, everyone's behavior is based on a measurable level of eight characteristics which could be determined by testing. Once those eight characteristic levels were determined, that person's behavior could be predicted within a relatively limited pattern that was used to determine his/her leadership capability. It was all very scientific and manageable.

One of the key characteristics was control. With a high level of control in one's profile, there was a strong likelihood that weaker characteristics could be overcome. Those with lesser levels of control would, in theory, be less likely to overcome detrimental personality traits and behaviors.

Or, to explain it in other terms in my general experience: Every person has their own experience of parental influence, education, interaction with friends (and enemies), social and team environments, and personal struggles. They have learned and reacted to all of those interactions every day and made choices along the way as to how they want to live their life. At some points, they may have changed those choices and taken a different direction, but their life's pattern is based on the sum total of the choices that they have made and implemented through their own experiences. Some choices have been easy and could be relatively easy to change given a new set of circumstances. Others have been firmly established and would be very difficult to change. Many have been reinforced through the years by reevaluation and confirmation.

For general discussion purposes, assume that half the people throughout history have chosen to include in their lives a faith in God and belief in some form of life after death. The other half has chosen to believe

that God doesn't exist at all or, at least, has no influence on their behavior. For those who believe in God and life after death, there is a relationship between their behavior in this life and the outcome in life after death, either favorable in heaven or unfavorable in hell.

I want to emphasize at this point that I am not making judgments about anyone – only God can judge a person's heart and soul. The outcome is strictly between each person and God. I only provide some commentary to help explain how our freedom of will and choice affects the outcome for life after death.

Without relying on theological reasons (which also apply), there are a number of sociological reasons why people reject religion. Many people are raised in nonreligious families and have no experience in their formative years of any relationship to God. I would expect very few such people to embrace religion entirely on their own without any experience through someone else. There are some notable exceptions where individuals have made significant conversions to faith through their own efforts, but those are extraordinary.

Others are born into non-practicing or semi-religious families that have some level of faith in God, but don't belong to an organized faith community. They probably are raised with a general sense of morality, but have had no significant exposure to religious practice or theology. I had an atheist colleague who did have a sense of morality, but it was based on the common good, not God or religion. It was also subjective and without a strong basis.

Over the last 50 years, a very large number of people born and raised "cradle Catholics" have left the Christian faith entirely or have converted to Protestantism or other religions. During their formative years, they received religious education, yet they used their free will and chose to leave the Catholic faith. Over the years, they likely reaffirmed their reasoning until it became a firm conviction that would take a major influence to bring about a return to the Catholic faith.

I could go on, but the point is that, for various reasons, many people have chosen to not practice religion in any form. Their relationship to God is known only to themselves and God, but it's not evident. Yes, they have free will and could change their behavior, but they have established that position over a period of time and are not easily able to change it. They are now

somewhat bound by their past decisions. It's not that they can't change, but it's become difficult and unlikely.

So what?

If you are one of the many who do not believe in God or life after death, then you have no real reason to make decisions about your behavior based on the consequences after death. On the other hand, millions of people around the world in all times and cultures have come to the conclusion that God and life after death are realities with very real consequences. They choose to make decisions about their behavior based on the premise of reward or punishment after death.

While there may be some enlightenment of your mind after death, I suggest that your soul will initially be in the same state as it was at the time of your death. Your relationship to God and your subsequent judgment will be based on your state of mind at that given time. Your outcome will be based on choices you've already made.

It's also likely Satan and his co-conspirators will be present at the time of your death and be doing everything possible to keep you from choosing God. If you're closer to Satan at the time of your death, it may be difficult or impossible to avoid that conclusion.

The good news, according to Maria Simma in *Get Us Out Of Here!!*, is that we'll have one last chance after death and before final judgment to exercise our free will and choose between God and Satan. The question is, will you choose God? Or will you have already made your decision?

CONSIDERATION: What decisions have you made about your lifestyle relative to God that you would not change? What kind of argument or evidence would it take for you to consider a change? What would you do if you were to consider a change?

THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD NEWS

The good news is that God wants you to pass safely through this life and to live happily ever after in heaven with him. Jesus explained it best in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The son chose to take his inheritance, leave the family home, and spend his fortune in a distant place. He fell into poverty as the country collapsed and he became a slave tending the animals. He came to his senses and decided to return to his father in sorrow for his failure, accept his punishment, and seek a place as a hired hand, not as a son. His father, seeing the son coming in the distance, ran out to greet him, welcomed him with open arms, forgave him, put a ring on his finger, and called for a celebration for his return. God will similarly treat anyone who returns to him in faith and repentance; it's that easy.

The bad news is that it may be difficult or unlikely for a person with a strongly established behavior that excludes or minimizes a relationship with God to even know what to do or say to be able to turn to God in any significant way. They may not be able to help themselves and may not be able or willing to accept help from anyone else. If you are somewhere in this general group of people and are concerned about your own life after death, what are some of the things you could think about?

If the strict interpretation of the principle applies such that eternal judgment will be based on the condition of one's soul at the time of death with no allowance for anything that may happen afterward – it would appear that many souls will be lost. Christians are taught that principle through the Bible and through fundamental religious education, and I have taken it as a matter of faith. My problem with it, on face value, is that it leaves too little hope for so many people so I've tried to find a more hopeful interpretation.

First, we must rely more on God's love and mercy for those souls based on their sincerity and perhaps lack of guilt for their own lack of faith or understanding. My fundamental background makes me hesitant to go into relativity as being an excuse because I'm a firm believer in moral certitude – black and white – but I realize that it's gray for many people. What's clearly wrong for me is completely acceptable to many others. For example, I'm a firm believer that the Sixth Commandment – You shall not commit adultery – prohibits all sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and woman, but clearly many people don't believe that it's wrong at all. If everyone who

broke the Sixth Commandment went to hell, there would be very few people in heaven.

So it's not sin alone that is the determining factor in one's judgment, but the interior condition of one's soul and only God can see and judge that. Secondly then, we must presume that God weighs other factors in the judgment, such as the environment of one's life, decisions made, good things done versus bad, pain and suffering already endured, etc. What's the overall balance? How bad is bad? How much of the just price have they already paid?

My third thought is that perhaps we may still have an opportunity after death to make choices that will affect the outcome. Is it going to be a one-way path with no personal control or a pathway that allows us to learn as we travel along and make some choices as we go?

Let's say I'm a nonbeliever who gets through death to find myself "alive" on the other side with some control over my direction. My first reaction might be a sharp turn toward God and immediate sorrow for my wrongdoing out of fear of an upcoming judgment. Would that be enough to make the difference? Might be, but it might also be too late because that's basically what the Bible says. We simply don't know how God is going to make that judgment.

One common theory is that judgment will be essentially self-inflicted so that at some point after death we'll see our entire lives before us, the good and the bad, and it will be self-evident what we face as a consequence. At that singular point, we may have the last opportunity to change our direction, choosing God over Satan. I suspect that few will see a good enough picture of their lives to determine that they are ready for heaven. In the book *Get Us Out Of Here!!,* Maria Simma states that souls go to purgatory on their own initiation to prepare themselves for heaven. Hence, those in a close relationship with Satan could actually see, upon reviewing their lives, that they really have no choice but to go to hell or maybe at the very bottom of purgatory.

My biggest concern is for any person who has a long-standing personal commitment against any relationship to God. They would likely maintain that attitude all the way to judgment. What's in their souls right now would likely be the same condition that would determine their salvation or damnation.

CONSIDERATION: If you don't believe in God and life after death, how hard would it be for you to change your mind? You have a free will to make a change if you choose, now or later. What would it take to convince you to change?

SPIRITUAL LIFE AROUND US

Many believe that the soul survives after death of the body. In order for that to be true, human life has to be made up of two parts – body and soul. The soul part of our life is spiritual in nature and does not die when the body does. If that is true, all the souls that have already died are still alive. So, where are they?

Faithful Christians as well as many others of little faith believe in a spiritual world. They may not understand the details or believe in the same things, but they still agree on life after death. For most, that comprises heaven, hell, and purgatory in between. Some insist there's only heaven and hell with no purgatory in their belief. That makes the consequences much clearer and more ominous.

Many exemplary people have lived heroic or profoundly charismatic lives and have been declared saints by the Church. The most significant step in the process of determining whether a person can be declared a saint is the documentation that the candidate after their death intervened in someone's life in a miraculous way. To achieve that, the saint would have to be alive in a spiritual world in a way that can be accessed by prayer and be able to respond in a physical way to the petition. That helps define the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds.

My belief is that we are, here and now, already in a spiritual world that surrounds us. It includes everyone from God on high to angels and saints, to our loved ones, and everyone else who has passed away. There are souls preparing for heaven and those that have already been condemned. It's only a step away through the doorway of death.

Prayer is a communication between us and God. In prayer, whether verbal or silent, in song or poem or reading or writing, one lifts their heart and mind to God. Prayer is a spiritual conversation between our soul and God. We hear our side of the conversation, but hearing the response from God requires paying close attention because the response doesn't usually come in direct words. Prayers are answered in many ways that may or may not be recognized or appreciated. But the point is, it's a two-way communication from God in the spiritual world and us in this physical life. That's the good news.

However, there is a negative side to the spiritual world – the world of Satan and his followers. They are just as influential, sometimes seemingly more so, in today's world. Every person in this human life is exposed to the influence of evil spirits at some level. We all have an element of our human nature that leaves us open to temptation. It's a matter of our own moral values and discipline as to how well we can defend against it, but even the best defense won't be enough sometimes. We are all sinners at some level; no one's perfect.

What is most unfortunate is the extent that the influence of the evil ones have had on the world – war, persecution, injustice, hatred, violence, abuse; all are products of Satan's influence. None of these conditions would exist without it. There might still be sin that we would have to deal with, but the evening news would be a lot easier to take.

What concerns me most are the non-religious who ignore the possibility that they will face judgment after death and are not going to be prepared for it. In the context of this here-and-now spiritual life, they are not taking advantage of the opportunities to communicate with God or the good side of the spiritual world. That means they are either ignoring it or, worse yet, cooperating with the evil side. It seems that ignoring God is, in fact, the outcome of cooperation with the Evil One. It's not that difficult to see the difference and to make changes in one's spiritual life, but first we must see the need for change and accept it. And believe me, the Evil One doesn't want us to.

CONSIDERATION: Where are you on the spectrum of spiritual life – complete belief to complete disbelief, or somewhere in between? What do you really believe in? Are you ready for judgment based on your belief?

YOUR INTELLECT AND WILL

The human soul has been described as one's memory, intellect, and will. Each person has their own experience and knowledge that populates their memory, but what about the intellect and will? How do they interact in the soul? How do they affect our relationship with God?

At some point in their lives, most people have had some exposure or the opportunity to consider religion and have come to some conclusion as to how they will accept or deny a religious belief. That can be at an early stage when adolescents may reject everything that their parents or others expose them to. They may reject various forms of external rules or required practices, particularly religion. They engage their own intellect at some level and reach conclusions about what they consider to be the truth for themselves. Many choose not to practice any religion and/or come to a conclusion that denies the existence of God. They may reach that conclusion without having fully considered the evidence with their intellect.

A particular experience may have pushed or pulled them one way or another. They may follow the example of someone that they respect, a parent or teacher or role model. They may be influenced by the many choices in modern culture or a lifestyle that is appealing to them. They may reach that conclusion through an intellectual process based on the kinds of information they considered.

I'm studying St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica,* probably the most complete theological and philosophical writings about God and man. It states that we can only know the essence of God through our intellect and that the intellect must be inspired by grace to know God at a higher level.

Knowledge of God depends on two things – the level of engagement of the intellect and the will to choose what the intellect presents. Even the very engagement of the intellect in pursuit of knowledge of God is under the control of the will. Some choose to pursue knowledge of God for any of a wide range of reasons, personal or intellectual. Even with that basic step forward, there are many paths that person can choose in pursuit of that knowledge. There are uncountable resources at the tip of your finger, thousands of books and many cultural or social resources. All of the various religions provide resources and pathways for that knowledge.

Others choose an atheist's disposition and their will prevents any exploration of God by the intellect. They deny the intellect the opportunity

to know God. Or if they do engage an intellectual approach, the will denies the acceptance of any conclusion in favor of knowledge of God.

St. Thomas also wrote that human intellect alone cannot reach a high level of knowledge of God; it requires the external influence of grace in our lives. Lack of any practice of religion, such as prayer, attendance at religious functions, informed reading, etc. limits the amount of grace that our soul can attain. Intellectual participation in religious practices opens the soul to grace and the better the practice, the more grace that can lead to a higher intellectual knowledge of God.

I have given a lot of thought to the process of life after death and come to some (intellectual) conclusions:

- There is a God with angels and saints in heaven.
- There are those who suffer the loss of their souls in hell with Satan.
- One enters life after death at the same level of intellectual knowledge of God that one had or employed prior to death.
- Most of us are not yet at a level of worthiness for heaven and will have to follow a path of reparation and preparation, commonly known as purgatory, to become worthy to enter heaven.
- The unborn, infants, children under the age of reason, and those with limited intellectual capacity are either taken directly into heaven or begin a pathway that leads to heaven.
- Our intellectual capacity will continue to grow after death based on our exposure to new forms of enlightenment and so our souls can draw closer to God and achieve higher levels of satisfaction.
- All of this is a gift from God, not something that we earn or deserve, hence the need for grace.

I believe that it's critical that everyone engage in a true intellectual evaluation of their relationship with God and take steps to improve it before death because we'll be held accountable for it at judgment with the subsequent rewards or punishments.

CONSIDERATION: How do you see your intellectual relationship with God? How do you see that will play out in life after death? How does your will interact with your intellect? Do you make up your mind before you fully engage your intellect to consider the evidence?

INTELLECT OR EMOTION?

My initial impression is that people learn and make decisions for their life based on their intellect. But the human mind has multiple and complex ways of processing knowledge, not just intellectually. So, trying to address knowledge of God and spiritual life must take into consideration other means of learning and making decisions that will ultimately affect our outcome.

Of the people who learn and make decisions primarily on an intellectual basis, many come to the conclusion that there is no God. Everything I've read about evolution was written by very intelligent people and many of those just don't believe that God is the source of all creation and life. History tells us of major societies with horrible outcomes that have been perpetrated by very intelligent people. Intellectual knowledge may be the primary way to know God, but it's just as likely to lead to error rather than truth.

For example, I don't believe anyone intellectually chooses to have lung cancer and then begins smoking to accomplish that goal. Further, people who smoke may intellectually agree that it could lead to lung cancer, but still choose to smoke. For many it takes more than an intellectual approach to quit. Smoking education alone isn't solving the problem. Often there needs to be an emotional or physical jolt to persuade a smoker to kick the habit.

A more direct example of my concern for people's salvation is that probably very few people intellectually choose to go to hell, but nevertheless lead a lifestyle that would get them there. They choose such a lifestyle based on short-term benefits without thought to the ultimate outcome of those choices.

If I didn't believe in a final outcome of either heaven or hell, I wouldn't be concerned for people's souls and wouldn't be addressing these concerns. I have to realize that people won't reach the same conclusions that I do based on intellectual arguments alone. Some may, but probably most won't. It will take a broader or different approach to get the point across. Yet, I don't have strong faith in emotional arguments. They are more easily swayed by new and different persuasions. Decisions can be made in emotional circumstances, but they may be temporary and changed when the emotions change.

Televangelists, for example, use highly charged sermons, moving music, and dramatic actions to get people's attention and convince them to change their lives. I don't argue that they are wrong as long as they are leading people to God. My concern is that they may continually need emotional reinforcement to maintain that level of faith without an intellectual basis.

I was initially influenced to become Catholic at age 7 because I liked what I saw and experienced – the music, the bells, the sights, the smells. I was too young to understand the words (a lot of it was in Latin anyway), but I liked the ceremony. But it was what I learned afterward that has kept me with the Church. The Church today still has all of those sights and sounds and smells, but the real reason for being there is God's word and personal presence that I experience intellectually.

When it comes down to it, I guess it's really a matter of the grace of God and a person's response to it that brings about conversion to faith. It doesn't make a difference if it's an intellectual or emotional response as long as the results are right.

CONSIDERATION: If you don't believe in God, would it take intellectual or emotional means to open your consideration of God? If you believe in God, what brought you to that faith; intellectual or emotional or other appeals? What retains and grows your faith?

MENTAL HEALTH RELATIVE TO SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Frequent news regarding horrific murders that have been repeatedly blamed on mental health disorders got me to thinking about the correlation between mental health and spiritual health. I have no training in mental health, but write this about spiritual health and where that leads us. So here are some thoughts about the correlation.

First, you have to believe in spiritual life itself. Many do not, and my perception is that the scientific aspects of mental health focus on the physical, neurological, and chemical aspects in explaining what's going on inside the brain. Things that can be measured in some form, more of this or less of that. They ignore or dismiss the spiritual elements.

We all have a psychological/mental profile of measurable strengths and weaknesses. We all have the same elements of mental health as those with major mental health problems, just more or less. An example is that the legal system determines guilt or innocence based on the mental health of a defendant. It may mean that no matter how horrific the crime is, the aggressor may or may not be guilty depending on his/her mental capability of knowing right from wrong at that time. Similarly, some repeat offenders suffer from mental health disorders that perpetuate their criminal behavior. They can't get out of the pattern of their crimes. Hence, society has become more focused on strengthening the mental health system and treating these people's underlying problems instead of criminalizing them and storing them in prisons.

This provides a basis for further discussion about how spiritual life is related to mental health. God, angels and saints, and uncountable people in heaven as well as Satan and his disciples interact with our own spiritual and physical lives. To the extent that they interact, they may affect our mental health. And vice versa, mental health can and does affect one's spiritual life.

One of the measures on a psychological profile is control. If you have a strong sense of control, you can overcome other weaknesses in your mental profile. Similarly, if you have strong control, you can avoid bad behavior. Weak control leaves you open to bad behavior and bad habits that generate criminal activity. Drug addicts can't control their need for more drugs and

don't see the harm in criminal behavior that feeds their drug addiction. To them, that behavior is normal and acceptable as a means to an end.

Alcohol and drugs create a desired buzz that essentially eliminates control and allows the types of behavior one wouldn't permit when sober. The more intoxicated a person becomes, the less control and potentially more inclination they have toward bad behavior. Same for many other addictions not induced by drugs or alcohol, such as gambling or pornography; they stimulate the brain in similar manners and overcome control.

Mental health disorders have a similar effect because they can cause the sufferer to lack control and have difficulty knowing right from wrong. In that condition, such a person is wide open to the evil influence of Satan and so could choose to participate in horrific actions of violence and murder. They don't recognize the evil and don't have control to resist it.

That brings up another important point, Satan largely deceives people into thinking right is wrong and wrong is right. You hear that in the investigations of some of society's terrible crimes. Perpetrators sometimes say that a vision or a voice told them they had to kill to make things right.

Generally, criminal behavior seems to stem from the perception that the wrong or illegal action is justified because it somehow benefits the perpetrator. For example, the influence of wealth can lead to greed and then to fraud because the goal of money is thought to justify the crime. Think Bernie Madoff. Unless they are mentally ill, people who commit crimes generally have enough sense of right and wrong, and choose to do the wrong anyway. That's because of Satan. The criminal act or bad behavior is not excused, however, because each person has free will to choose and needs to be held accountable for that choice.

The bottom line is that mental health and criminal behavior are tied to our spiritual nature and openness to the influence of Satan, the source of all evil.

CONSIDERATION: Do you think this is a fair assessment of mental health versus spiritual health? Why or why not? What do you think needs to be done to address this problem in society?

YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK, NOT WHAT YOU THINK YOU ARE

Career and management training tries to convince you that you can become what you want to be by positive thinking and affirmations. See what you want to become in your mind, plan the steps you need to become that person, then take them. Ambition is essential to career advancement. You become who you want to be.

That's not the same as thinking you are capable of becoming someone you aren't. For example, I knew a young man who felt he was capable of being the boss, but he didn't perform that way. He didn't have the skills necessary and, because he thought he was already there, wouldn't take steps to improve himself.

In my own case, I always felt that I could become the director of public works. I applied several times for that position, both in and outside of my organization, but was never selected for or promoted to that position. I was always second best for one reason or another. I never advanced beyond the assistant level. I thought I was doing everything necessary to achieve that position while others saw that I was great as an assistant, but not quite good enough for the top spot. While I never became who I thought I was capable of being, the director, I was very successful as the assistant director. I was recognized for my achievements at that level, and for that I am very grateful.

My recent reflections helped me realize that you are what you think, not what you think you are.

The person you are on the outside is the result of what you are really thinking on the inside. Your interior disposition, intellect, and experience determine who you are. That's what makes you unique. No one else has that same combination.

Outside appearance can make you stand out, but it doesn't determine who you are as a person. As they say, beauty is only skin deep. While there is truth and wisdom to the adage about dressing for success, that's a reflection of what you are thinking about yourself, not simply your appearance. On the other hand, you may not be successful because of your improper appearance. That, too, is a reflection of what you are thinking.

Now the heart of what I'm getting at: You can know God and act the way you think from the inside and you become a reflection of God on the

outside. Or, you can deny God on the inside and that reflects on how you act on the outside. Even worse, you can think like the Evil One on the inside and could become a very harmful person.

Subsequently, heaven or hell is your destiny based on what you are thinking. To ultimately achieve heavenly status, you must be thinking at that level. As it says in the Book of 1 Samuel 16:7: "Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart." You will be judged based on what is in your heart.

CONSIDERATION: How do you see the relationship between what you think about God and Satan, heaven and hell, and the consequences in life after death? Is that a self-fulfilling prophecy?

DISPOSITION

One's disposition takes into account temperament, character, and personality; it shows on the outside who the person really is on the inside. So another way to describe one's soul is the word disposition. That's the basis for our nature, what we think, how we act. God knows and will ultimately judge us on the basis of our interior disposition.

That helps me to better understand what happens at the end of mortal life and the beginning of spiritual life after death. We have a self-defining disposition in our life, that is, we choose it as our nature, the basis for our thoughts and actions. We'll take that disposition with us through the doorway of death into eternal life. And it is that disposition that will be the basis for our judgment and determination of the course or path of our spiritual life after death: heaven or hell or something in between

That gives me hope that my loved ones will be judged well to the extent that I know their good dispositions even though they don't express open belief in God or practice religion. I'm not judging them, good or bad, but have a reasonable hope for their judgment and ultimate eternal life in heaven based on their disposition.

Strictly speaking, much of the text we see in the Bible doesn't provide that outlook. It frequently speaks of harsh judgment for those who don't express and live a life of faith. That's one way of looking at it. There is also much text that provides hope, but that takes a more lenient way around those stricter passages. Seeing judgment in terms of disposition makes it easier for me to understand.

Finally, we rely on God's love and mercy. He wants us in heaven with him and has given everything for that to happen. We just have to accept it.

CONSIDERATION: Take some time to think about your own disposition and how it will look to God at judgment. What would you like to change before that judgment?

CHAPTER 7

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Now that I've laid a background for an understanding of God and Satan, creation, and spiritual life, I'll discuss the ultimate outcome – the eternal life of our soul after death. That's what this is really all about. The supernatural states of heaven, hell, or purgatory await us upon death. I believe that we are literally already there in our physical life, but that we don't realize it. After death, that will become our reality, and it will be beyond our wildest dreams and earthly comprehension. But, that doesn't mean we can't know and understand the basics about it.

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

Most mainstream religions are based on the fundamental principle that God exists and that man's ultimate goal in life is to be with God in heaven after death.

A similar principle demands that there is also an opposite reality, that is, the existence of Satan and hell. It's unreasonable to believe in one without the other. Unfortunately, that also means that not everyone is necessarily going to achieve a destiny of eternal life in heaven. So let's explore what that means.

Christians' faith in God and heaven, Satan and hell is largely based on the New Testament of the Bible. The initial thrust of the four Gospels is on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, who was subsequently executed by the religious and governmental powers as an insurrectionist. That could have been the end of the story about a charismatic man who said and did wonderful things, but for his resurrection from death. The rest of the New Testament focuses on Christ's works and instructions to his disciples after he arose from the dead and their spreading of that new faith in life after death, heaven and hell.

Jesus taught extensively about heaven and especially about the Father, largely in parables. He also taught about Satan and hell, such as the temptation of Jesus by "the tempter" to whom he responded, "Get away, Satan! It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve." Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him. (Matthew 4:10-11)

Christians' faith is that the nature of our lives includes a spiritual element we know as our soul and that our soul will live on forever after death. The questions are: Where and how? What will that be like? How can we affect it, if at all?

We turn to the New Testament and the Church's teaching for over 2,000 years to find those answers and also to the teachings of saints and scholars who have studied, collaborated, and written volumes about these questions from numerous points of view. We don't have to recreate their work; we just have to study it for ourselves.

The where and how is just a step away through the doorway of death because we will actually live through it. Our soul will awake in the spiritual world beyond our physical nature. Heaven, hell, and purgatory are real places;

it's just unclear exactly where they are in physical terms. Because God is universal, these places are also universal.

What will the afterlife be like? It will offer the entire range from the deepest depths of hell with its related pain and suffering to the highest levels of heaven next to God with unbounded love and joy. Purgatory will be in between with some of both, depending on the level of salvation we have attained in this life.

A fundamental principle of many religions is that our final destiny – heaven or hell – is determined by the nature of our soul at the time of our death. We will be judged once and for all eternity based on the condition of our soul at that singular point in time in our life. Under that premise, we could change our destiny up to the last second of the life of our body, but not after death.

If that were strictly the case, there would be relatively few souls going directly to heaven as compared to the many that aren't perfect at the time of death. To explain what happens after death in a more hopeful outcome, religions have proposed the state of life known as purgatory for those who don't deserve an eternity in hell, but are not yet ready for life with God in heaven. That would be a period of time (whatever time is in a spiritual world) for reparation or expiation for our shortcomings (sins, failure to do what we're supposed to do, etc.) and preparation for life in heaven.

I argue for an expanded understanding of what happens in that unknown gray area of life after death. I believe firmly in the existence of God and heaven, Satan and hell, and purgatory. I also believe in the permanent spiritual nature of the human soul. But to postulate that the human soul is incapable of further learning or choosing after death limits the nature of our intellect, will, and conscience. I propose that there may still be an opportunity after death for subsequent learning and the ability to make choices that would affect the outcome of our eventual destiny after sufficient conversion and reparation in purgatory for our shortcomings.

We will determine our own level in purgatory based on our own lives, what we have chosen and done, what's really in our hearts. So, we can affect the outcome and choose a place closer to heaven and further from hell through our own free will. We attain that through the love and support of God, who is just waiting for our next move. It's a gift and we just need to accept it.

CONSIDERATION: What are your thoughts about life after death? How concerned are you? How do those thoughts affect your lifestyle?

DEATH'S COCOON

Life and death are somewhat like a caterpillar – living, eating, growing, maturing, and then entering the cocoon, then to emerge into the real fullness of its purpose as the beautiful butterfly, free to fly in the sunshine from flower to flower in serenity and peace.

Similarly, we are born, live, eat, grow, learn, mature, age, and then die (or die at any point along the way). Death is only our cocoon; we'll emerge on the other side. The question is, what will it be like on the other side of our emergence from death? Will it be all serenity and peace or pain and suffering or something in between?

The emergence from the cocoon of death is entirely dependent on the quality and value, in God's terms, of a person's life in total and, specifically, at the time of death. It varies from the most perfect extreme of Jesus Christ to the most evil extreme of Satan. There are living examples of people near both of those extremes, but most of us are somewhere in the middle though we might be closer to one than the other and that will affect our emergence after death.

As we see from the descriptions of those who've had near-death experiences, there will be an immediate sense of relief, no pain or anxiety. They describe movement toward "the light" – a powerful bright presence that draws them forward. In the book, *Hungry Souls: Supernatural Visits, Messages, and Warnings from Purgatory*, author Gerard J. M. van den Aardweg describes the movement around and toward that light.

I'm not aware of any reports of people who have returned to life from beyond that point so I speculate on what comes next. I believe that "light" to be Jesus Christ drawing us toward himself. I believe that's where judgment will take place. Christ will review our complete lives, physical and mental, thoughts, words, and deeds. Every step of our lives will, as they say, pass before our (spiritual) eyes. We will see ourselves in completeness, exposing every good and every bad moment. I believe that we will literally judge ourselves in terms of our newly enlightened conscience.

Likewise, Christ will read our hearts and souls and examine our conscience before making judgment. We sometimes think of that as balancing our good and bad on a scale with the outcome determined by which side is the heaviest. But it's more than that because the rewards and benefits we've

experienced in this life will also be balanced against the pains and sufferings that we've endured. It's the total picture of our life that Christ will see and judge.

That judgment will determine the rest of our eternal life. Those who lived lives in close relationship with God and have more than balanced the good and the bad will be welcomed into heaven, probably most by way of purgatory. Those who lived a life with little or no relationship with God and are weighed down with negative behaviors and a strong relationship with Satan will presumably be sent to hell. I believe that most of us are somewhere in between, not quite good enough for heaven and not bad enough for eternal damnation. And that's where we'll emerge from our cocoon of death.

CONSIDERATION: What are your thoughts about facing death? We know that it will come sooner or later, so how do you prepare for it spiritually? Are you ready for it?

RETIREMENT, DEATH, AND THEN WHAT?

As I was nearing the 25th year of my employment, I attended a number of retirement planning programs. They emphasized that I would need to manage my investments for the long term and provided guidance on the options available. I would also need to manage my health care until Medicare would kick in. My wife and I were still novices at it all when I retired.

I started my own consulting practice and got periodic part-time contracts that provided income so we didn't have to draw much from the investments. I started following our portfolio's performance and learned enough to take control of the investment decisions.

We decided to sell the home we built and lived in for 35 years and to build a new home in a better location. The housing market was good and we made a nice gain. We were eventually able to pay off the mortgage for the new home and now all the equity was ours. So far, so good.

The retirement planning was accompanied with some end-of-life planning. I purchased another life insurance policy and long-term care insurance. We talked about estate planning, but didn't do anything specific except pay off the mortgage. We had our wills prepared along with end-of-life and power of attorney paperwork. So we're more or less prepared for the future up to our death.

We've spent a lot of time and resources over the last 20 years preparing for a secure future, but we're still going to die, probably in fewer than 15 years. So what happens after death? Nothing? Something? I've spent a lifetime preparing for life after death. Why isn't everyone planning for that outcome? If there really is life after death, why aren't most people spending at least the same effort in planning for that circumstance as retirement? In fact, that's more important because it will last forever.

The hymn *Amazing Grace* states, "when we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun; we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun." Of course, time exists in a different way after death, but we think of it in terms of our earthly experience. Suppose we live to be 100 and afterlife lasts for 10,000 years. That would mean our earthly life is 1 percent of our total life. Yet we spend 100 percent of our energy making our earthly existence the best we can and may totally ignore the other 99 percent of our lives. That doesn't make any sense to me. Does the idea that eternity is thousands of times more than 10,000 years make any difference?

First, I'm absolutely convinced that there is life after death. There is God who will judge us, Satan who wants us, heaven where we could be happy for the rest of eternity, and hell where we could end up if we don't mind our manners.

Second, every day that isn't directed toward God and heaven is directed toward the potential for a bad outcome after death. No one wants to go to hell, but it seems many people don't care enough if they go to heaven because they aren't preparing for that eventuality. At least I don't see the effort that seems to be needed for a positive outcome.

Third, it's everyone's free choice to decide where they are headed after death. So why would anyone choose to ignore it or take it for granted?

Probably many in that situation just don't believe in that stuff anyway – no afterlife, no God or Satan, no heaven or hell, so it doesn't make any difference. Death is the permanent end of a lifetime. There's no reason to provide for an outcome beyond death because there isn't any. No consequences for making the wrong moves. Just do as well as possible in this life and hope for a peaceful death. That also means that morality is entirely personal; everything is OK if you feel good about it. Or, as they say, no harm, no foul.

That's related to the predominant culture we live in, secular humanism: "Humanism that systematically opposes the introduction of religious ideas or standards into the functions of the state, especially into public education; a system of doctrines and practices that disregards or rejects any form of religious faith and worship." (*Webster's Dictionary*)

On the other hand, some take life after death very seriously and lead a mortal life with purpose toward God and heaven. Religion, church attendance, prayer, a virtuous life, and avoiding temptations are the external signs. They know what it takes and try to make the most of it. They know they aren't perfect, but trust in a favorable outcome due to their positive efforts.

The point is that we end up where we plan to be. That goes for retirement as well as death and afterlife. You may not be able to control all of the things that occur between here and there, but you need to plan for a good outcome if that's where you want to end up. Not planning for an afterlife in heaven may mean that we won't end up there.

CONSIDERATION: Are you planning for retirement? Are you planning for life after death? If so, what are you doing about it? If not, why not?

WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS FOR ENTRY INTO HEAVEN?

What it all comes down to is this: What are the entry standards for getting into heaven? No standards because everyone is going to heaven anyway? Very strict standards that few are going to meet? Somewhere in between?

For many, it's a question they ignore because they don't believe in God or heaven or life after death. But for many others who do believe, it's the big unknown and the reason for all of their efforts to make the cut.

Think of the efforts professional athletes make to have a chance at making the team. They know the standards are very high and that there are only a limited number of spaces on the team. They begin their training at a young age and continue to develop their skills as they grow. Many go to college because that's the place where they can get the best coaching and experience. They practice and work out daily.

Well, it's the same with getting into heaven. The standards are the highest and require a continual, strong effort. We need to get the best coaching and training every day. We have to win the battles within our lives that could keep us from reaching that goal.

There are many references in the Bible that indicate the strict standards for entry into heaven. Here are a few:

> *I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.* (Matthew 5:20)

> *Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few.* (Matthew 7:13, 14)

> *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of*

heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:23, 24)

It's not clear whether the standards are for getting into heaven immediately upon death or by way of purgatory. Presumably, most of us will enter heaven through purgatory. The standards for entry into purgatory are somewhere between not good enough for heaven and high enough to keep us from hell. But we don't know where the cutoff line is. Aim too low and we may miss the cut. We need to be assured that there are standards and need to do our best to meet them. Failure is literally hell.

The standards for passing from purgatory into heaven are perfection in every sense. We must complete atonement for our shortcomings to become eligible for passage. We enter purgatory with the results of our life choices, thoughts, words, and deeds and leave with all of them completely resolved. The length and difficulty of purgatory is strictly based on the condition of our souls at the time of our death. The better the condition, the shorter and easier the pathway. It's said elsewhere that some will be in purgatory until the end of time. That may not be hell, but a long and difficult time in purgatory is not the goal. We can do better, but will we?

CONSIDERATION: What do you think are the standards for entry into heaven? Purgatory? Are you preparing to meet those standards?

PATHWAYS THROUGH PURGATORY

I think of purgatory as a maze of pathways leading to heaven. Those with relatively minor obligations will take a shorter, easier pathway while others with more serious obligations will take a longer, more difficult pathway. We have no measure for how long or difficult that will be. It's relative to the weight of our judgment, but might also be affected by how we respond to it.

My thinking is that all pathways have three elements – conversion, reparation, and growth. Conversion is changing one's perspective to know and love God. I believe most people have good enough hearts to avoid hell, but many have either denied God or have no significant relationship with him. They will need to be converted to know and love God for without that no one can go to heaven. That has to be reflected in our intellect and free will to make it happen. It might be that those who deny God in this life continue to deny God in purgatory and will have a very long pathway until they make the decision to know and love God. Those who already know and love God will be on a shorter, easier pathway.

The element of reparation or expiation is "paying the price" for our shortcomings. That may take any number of forms, but won't be easy or light. It might be as painful as hell, but without the permanence. Tradition and some testimony describe it as being the same as the fires of hell. Because we won't have a physical body, the pain will be spiritual, so my sense is that it will be akin to depression, worry, anxiety, grief, or deep sadness. At any rate, we won't be happy about it, but that's the price we'll have to pay before we can fully experience conversion and growth.

The element of growth is both intellectual and spiritual. We'll start our pathway right where our life was at the time of our death. We'll still have our intellect to experience what's happening, see the effects of the pathways and make choices to follow a particular pathway. The spiritual aspect is all about love of God and neighbor. Those who have been selfish may still carry that into purgatory and will not be free to move toward God until they turn to love. We've got to grow in knowledge and love of God until we reach the level needed for passage into heaven. In other words, we'll need to become a saint. That's the goal of our pathway.

My point in describing all of this is to urge you to take every step possible in this life to conversion, reparation, and spiritual growth. Prepare yourself for an easier judgment and a shorter pathway to heaven. What you accomplish now, here on earth in this life, has a direct effect on your outcome.

CONSIDERATION: How do you understand the pathways through purgatory? How else would you describe it?

GRACE IN OUR LIVES

An alternative way to envision purgatory is to think of it as the stairway to heaven. The stairway is very long with multiple landings with the top landing being at the gateway to heaven and the very bottom step being just above hell. It is exactly parallel to our existing life on earth. Our actions, words, thoughts, and feelings are somewhere on that stairway right now. We have already taken steps up and down it in our lives and will continue up or down from now until our death.

We are greatly blessed who have all our material needs met, present and future; not everyone is so fortunate. We work to acquire money as a way of providing for our families, our comfortable lifestyle, health care, and retirement. The amount of money is relative to the level in which we are seen in society; poverty, just enough to get by, middle income, wealthy, and beyond all reasonable need.

For materialists, that's the ultimate measure: he with the most toys wins. That's the temporal measure of success. And we largely ignore or minimize our concern for the less fortunate who are in abject poverty or can barely make ends meet. By that measure, they are at the bottom of the stairway no matter how good a person they are. Personal wealth is the entire measure, not one's value as a person.

But when we look beyond this temporal life and see that we live on after death, the rest of the stairway comes into view. The materialist's measure of success is turned on its head; the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Here, the entire measure is one's character, not personal wealth. That's shown repeatedly in the New Testament; Jesus has love and concern for the poor, the sick, the disabled, and disdain for the wealthy. He himself relied on others' hospitality for food and shelter.

The starting position of our souls after death on the stairway to heaven is probably in reverse order to our earthly wealth. Here, the ones with the fewest toys win. And the coin of this measure is grace. What's more, it's free for the asking; it's a gift from God. We don't earn it or deserve it. And the key to grace is love: God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for our brothers and sisters. Grace is the reward for our love of God, our prayers and our sufferings, our good works, our charity towards others, and our rejection of Satan.

I would like to think that people would realize this and direct their lives toward grace instead of vice. But the reason they don't is Satan, who is at the bottom of the stairway to heaven. He wants you down there and does everything in his power to get and keep you there.

So there you have the whole secret to success in life, both now and for eternity: Grace.

CONSIDERATION: If you don't understand grace, take some time to learn about it, and then decide how to increase the grace in your own life. It's the coin and measure for your eternal life.

STUCK IN PURGATORY

One of my biggest concerns is that many people could become stuck in purgatory. Various things I've read about purgatory and the stories told by souls that have actually visited people say that individuals can get stuck in purgatory and be unable to move into heaven. Why can't these poor souls move upward?

My first reaction is that they can't self-determine the right direction. They must accept God's gifts of love and grace to move forward on that pathway. So that's the first clue, it's because they still haven't accepted God's grace for some reason. And why not? Because they never accepted it during their temporal lives. They persisted in disbelief and denied the very gift that would lead them to heaven.

Secondly, purgatory isn't God's punishment for our failings and misdeeds. I don't believe that God punishes anyone because of his overwhelming love and mercy. Purgatory is a direct result of our own choosing, even though we don't recognize the choice at the time. When we make the choice to deny God's grace, we point our lives toward the lower levels of purgatory. We may still have a good heart and not merit condemnation in hell, but we won't have the levels of God's grace to move upward toward heaven. God does not condemn anyone to hell or the lower levels of purgatory; people take that pathway of their own free will.

I believe purgatory is very much like our current life on earth, to some extent a continuation of the current state of our souls. I look around and see many people who choose to remain steadfast in their opposition to any form of belief in or relationship with God. So, they will likely maintain that firm opposition through death and into purgatory, if not hell itself. If they can't or won't recognize God in their lives now, it could be that they won't be able to do so after death and are destined to become stuck in purgatory.

Why would they not go to hell? Maybe they will, but I believe that God judges the soul and that good people, though not in a positive relationship with God, will somehow be saved from hell. That could only mean life in purgatory until they have completed their preparation for heaven. And without any basis for understanding how to get there, they could remain stuck in purgatory. Compared to hell, that's not bad, but compared to heaven, it's a very disheartening position, especially if it's for eternity.

On the positive side, the upper levels of purgatory are approaching heaven so they will be free from the pain and anguish of the lower levels. That could be the entry level of many people of faith and good lives who are just not yet fully ready for heaven. Not many of us are saints so we won't be fully ready for heaven when we die. We will need some time to polish up our souls, either in reparation for our failings or preparation for our entry into heaven.

Also, relative to our pathway through purgatory is the presence or absence of good works and prayer, pain and suffering in our temporal lives. Purgatory is a place for expiation for our failings and misdeeds. Some of that expiation is borne in our temporal lives, both when we do good things and when we suffer. Some may have a very short pathway through purgatory because they have already completed a significant amount of their expiation.

Finally, the lower levels of purgatory are very much like hell, but still with the ultimate promise of heaven at the end. That thought gives me hope for all those who otherwise seem to have lived a good life, but still rejected God's grace when they had opportunities to accept it.

CONSIDERATION: How do you feel about the possibility that people may become stuck in purgatory? How do you see that playing out in this temporal life?

SUPERNATURAL VISITS

Another way to understand life after death is to read accounts of direct experiences. The book *Hungry Souls* describes a small museum in Rome near the Vatican that contains exhibits of physical evidence of encounters with spirits. The Little Purgatory Museum is located inside the Church of the Sacred Heart of Suffrage.

The author, Gerald J. M. van den Aardweg, is a Dutch psychotherapist with substantial experience dealing with paranormal events and has explored the history of visits by souls from purgatory. He describes the Little Purgatory Museum and reviews several visits by deceased souls that have appeared to a number of people and have been well documented. The overriding message of the book is that the "poor souls in purgatory" experience suffering similar to the burning of hell, but with the assurance of a positive outcome in heaven. The suffering varies in intensity from very painful and depressing to relief and satisfaction. It also varies in length from short stays to almost eternity for some. A common characteristic is that of burning. In cases where the poor souls are able to touch something or someone, the thing or person touched is burned. It's a supernatural burning that leaves physical evidence. Exhibits of things that have been burned by those touches are in the Little Purgatory Museum.

The poor souls that have been allowed by God to communicate in this way are very few. The souls always ask the people they visit for Masses, prayers, or other effective actions on their behalf to relieve their suffering. Masses are most effective. Rosaries and other Marian devotions are effective, but any action for their benefit is helpful. There is a strong connection between the poor souls and the Sacred Heart of Jesus as well as the Immaculate Conception (Mary).

The poor souls may appear to a relative, but mostly they visit very devout persons who can understand and respond to their requests for assistance. The book describes a number of saints who have been visited by the poor souls as well as other religious and laity. First visits are frightening for the receiver. It's what we would expect seeing a so-called ghost. Subsequent visits establish a relationship that may continue until the poor soul is released from purgatory. They are distinguished from evil souls by the nature of their objective to ask for Masses, prayers, and good actions on

their behalf. The souls from hell can't escape their condemnation and don't ask for support.

Hungry Souls begins with a number of documented near-death episodes in which people describe their experiences beyond death before returning to life. Those experiences are substantiated by the testimony of some of the documented visits by poor souls from purgatory. The author writes:

> *These examples give at least some impression of the crucial moment when the soul has to render an account of its whole life in the face of God. That is the awful hour of truth: salvation with or without Purgatory – or damnation. One of the main reasons for the occasional appearances of souls from the dead is undoubtedly to urge the living to draw their consequences from this reality.* (9)

So, perhaps purgatory really is a place of suffering and not a place we desire to go. The author also makes it clear that the poor souls rely on living persons and saints in heaven to support them for things they can't do for themselves, hence the requests for Masses, prayers, and good works. The poorest of the souls have no one to support them. The book urges us to pray often for the souls in purgatory and says that our offerings will be rewarded in return when we need their support.

The focus of Chapter 2 in *Hungry Souls* is on reflections from Sister Lúcia Santos, who along with her two young cousins witnessed visits from the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal in 1917. Lucia, who died at age 97 in 2005, was the last of three to pass. In her final memoir she wrote of purgatory:

> *After all – I ask myself – what is purgatory actually? We see that the word "purgatory" means "purification," and as all of us are more or less sinners, all of us need being purified of our own sins, faults, and imperfections, in order to be admitted to the enjoyment of the possession of the Kingdom of eternal glory.*
>
> *This purification, that is called "Purgatory," can be more or less extended, depending on the number of our sins,*

faults and imperfections, and on their gravity, for which we have not given complete satisfaction by means of reparation, good works, penance and prayers.

And how are we purified in Purgatory, or what purifies us? I don't know very well. In the past, they said that we were purified by being thrown into a hot fire and that fire was equal to that of Hell.

As for me, it seems that what purifies us is love, the fire of divine love, which is communicated by God to the souls in proportion as every soul corresponds. It is said that, if a soul is granted the grace to die with a perfect act of love, that this love purifies it totally, so that it can go straight to Heaven. This shows us that what purifies is love, along with contrition, sorrow for having offended God and the neighbor by sins, faults and imperfections, because all of this is against the first and last commandments of the Law of God: "You shall love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength." (12, 13)

CONSIDERATION: How do you respond to this summary from this book? Do you find it credible? Why or why not? Have you read about or had other experiences related to supernatural visits? You may want to read *Hungry Souls*.

"GET US OUT OF HERE!!"

Some of the most interesting evidence regarding life after death can be found in the book, *Get Us Out Of Here!!,* written by Nicky Eltz from extensive interviews with mystic Maria Simma (1915-2004), and a similar booklet, *The Amazing Secret Of The Souls In Purgatory,* written by Sister Emmanuel of Medjugorje from her interview with Simma.

Maria Simma was a humble Catholic woman who lived in the small mountain village of Sonntag, Austria. At age 25, she was visited by a soul from purgatory, a man who wouldn't respond to her questions or her demands that he leave. She tried to physically get him out of her room, but she couldn't touch him. She could see and hear him, but he didn't have a physical body. She reported this visit to her parish priest the next day and he instructed her to ask, "What is it that you need from me?" The soul visited her again the next night. This time he responded, "Have three Masses celebrated for me; then I'll be delivered" (Eltz, 13). After that experience, she continued to receive visits from other souls in purgatory throughout her life.

Simma said that our lives exist in three parts: physical (body), mental (intellect, memory, etc.), and spiritual (soul). I have, throughout my writing, addressed the mental and spiritual parts as being one and the same. This distinction is important because we need to nurture our spiritual life specifically as we do the other two parts. And, of course, it's all relative to our relationship with God.

With regard to the bodily nature of the soul after death, Simma says, *"They (souls from purgatory) say they do not notice that they do not have a body with them. They have a transfigured body and it can take the form of a healed and dressed human body."* (Eltz, 11)

Simma describes judgment as a person being given a short period of time after death where they see the events of their lives and the subsequent outcome with one last chance to accept their failings, have remorse, and turn toward God. They judge themselves before they must accept or reject God which determines their course for eternity. From her descriptions, it appears that most souls reject Satan but are not sufficiently purified to attain heaven and must place themselves in purgatory where that purification occurs. She said the souls themselves desire to go to Purgatory in order to prepare themselves for Heaven. (Emmanuel, 10)

She describes purgatory as having three main levels: one close to heaven with relatively light suffering and short duration, one close to hell with intense pain and suffering lasting for a very long time, and the rest somewhere between those two extremes. She said that within those main levels, *"Yes, a very large number (of levels), because every soul is so very different when it arrives there. There are great sufferings and there are lesser sufferings and everything in between. There are probably as many levels as there are souls because no two people or two souls, of course, are ever identical."* (Eltz, 8)

Simma received countless letters over the years from people all over the world seeking spiritual advice and assistance, and she spent many hours each day replying to these requests in writing and in prayer. She spent her life giving spiritual advice and consolation to countless souls, along with assisting the poor souls in purgatory through her daily prayers and sacrifices. She never accepted donations or gifts from anyone and lived off her garden and her skillful sewing work.

My other essays on purgatory are generally consistent with Simma's answers with some exceptions I need to point out. Simma states that the souls in purgatory can no longer perform merit for their own sake; they must rely on merits from people on earth and souls in heaven. My essays on purgatory speak of having some control through one's will to move oneself toward heaven. The good news is that the souls in purgatory are happy that they are, in fact, on their way to heaven and understand that they must complete their atonement before being pure enough to enter. So they do move toward heaven, but apparently not under their own efforts. Each one's sentence to purgatory is unique and relative to their performance in life on earth.

An interesting element in Simma's answers is no mention of a requirement of baptism. It seems strictly a matter of one's interior disposition toward God and other people, avoiding sin and doing good deeds for others. And most significantly, one's love for God and others can overcome one's sins, still leading to purgatory and ultimately heaven. Several examples in the interviews show that it's not the exterior acts that result in salvation, but what's going on in the person's soul. One example was a person engaged in behaviors that would be considered sinful at the time of death, but had an interior change of heart, of contrition and/or love that made the difference.

Her testimony regarding these visits and many other documented visits by souls from purgatory and a few by souls from hell confirm for me

the reality of life after death. It needs to be taken seriously because one's eternal outcome is at stake.

Simma and this book have not been endorsed by the Catholic Church and, similar to many other personal experiences and writings, they are considered private revelation though not contradictory to the teachings of the Church. The book was written in conjunction with Simma's own local pastor and other priests. A priest/theologian, Fr. Slavko Barbaric wrote the preface, and her pastor, Fr. Fidolin Bischof wrote a testimony to Simma's life at the end of the book. The author also followed a rigorous review process with other theologians and religious people to ensure that it was valid and didn't contradict Church's teaching.

I encourage you to read these books with Simma's descriptions about the conditions of purgatory. You can also see more details about her life and experience with the souls in purgatory on a website for the Mystics of the Church:

http://www.mysticsofthechurch.com/2013/10/maria-simma-visits-from-souls-in.html

CONSIDERATION: Are you aware of other descriptions of visits by souls from purgatory? Have you investigated them? What do you think about purgatory based on these descriptions?

CHAPTER 8

MORALITY

Morality is the fundamental element in determining one's fitness for heaven. It's the core of one's conscience, one's perception of right and wrong. In this chapter, I describe my understanding of morality. I clearly understand that many won't share the views of this Catholic man in his 70s. I ask you to consider your own perspective on moral values and their effect on your lifestyle.

LIFE'S MORAL PATHWAYS

I think about life as a moral pathway that stretches from past through the present and into the future with a range wide enough to include the extreme morally right and the extreme morally wrong. Like the little car image on the GPS screen, you are following a moral pathway to a destination of your own choice and it shows you the pathway to it. Turn left, turn right, with periodic "recalculating", but always forward.

In a sense you could also go backward, but you can't turn back time. Where you are at this moment in life determines your starting point; you choose the pathway forward from right here and now. The basis for movement along your pathway is moral behavior or lack thereof. Good morals will move you to the right; vices move you to the left. The net result is that your movement forward lies in the balance of good and bad choices. So let's explore what terms describe these pathways.

A thesaurus provides a plethora of synonyms for good, meaning virtuous or moral: admirable, blameless, charitable, dutiful, ethical, exemplary, guiltless, honest, honorable, innocent, praiseworthy, pure, reputable, respectable, right, sound, uncorrupted, untainted, well behaved, worthy.

Another word I like is altruistic: unselfish, benevolent, charitable, considerate, generous, humane, philanthropic, self-sacrificing.

Synonyms for immoral: base, corrupt, criminal, delinquent, evil, iniquitous, mean, sinful, vicious, vile, wicked, wrong. Similar are synonyms for evil: atrocious, depraved, destructive, disastrous, foul, harmful, hateful, iniquitous, injurious, loathsome, low, malicious, malignant, obscene, offensive, repulsive, revolting, spiteful, unpleasant, vicious, vile, wicked, wrathful. Interestingly, when used as a noun, evil can be defined as devilry or diabolism, the last two words implying Satan.

Look at those words and think of each one in terms of the pathway you are following, here and now. What are the real characteristics of your life? Which words best describe you and the pathway you have chosen?

I'd like to think that everyone would be on the right-side pathway and not the left, but that's not reality. Each of us traverses life's road, veering right or left at any given time. You may be in church, but your mind is somewhere else, perhaps traveling more left than right. Or you may be in a drug den, but with the firm goal of getting yourself out and on the right path. Probably, you are mostly in the middle, not so far to the right as perfect, but not so far to the left as evil.

If the results of walking the path to the right are beneficial, why would anyone choose to walk to the left, where harm and ruin become the landscape? Perhaps because they don't see it as bad or they just kind of slid over there. We begin going down those pathways with just little steps in that direction. We are all subject to weakness of resolve and don't see the harm in little things, maybe just once. There is a first time for everything. No one ends up far to the left the first time. They get there by small steps and turns to the left along life's pathway.

I believe the real explanation is that we turn away from God, who is perfectly good and the destination on the extreme right of life's pathway. Satan's domain lies on the extreme left, and that's the way he leads us if we let him.

CONSIDERATION: Read and think about the words describing good and evil and choose ones under each heading that best describe your life's path. Do you see things that you would like to change? How would you go about changing your pathway?

Here's a visual way to look at it. Write down the word and mark your choice on the side that fits your answer. It's your own life that you're looking at so be honest with yourself. What does your own pathway look like?

DESCRIPTIVE WORD	NO	NEUTRAL	YES
Admirable			
Blameless			
Charitable			
etc.			

GOD'S MORAL GUIDANCE

Collectively, over 2,000 years of Judeo-Christian tradition holds firmly that the Old Testament and New Testament contain the authoritative written word of God. In them, we seek to find the very truthful core that is God's explicit direction for our lives. Portions of the Old Testament are attributed to the direct spoken words of God himself, such as the Ten Commandments. Much of the other text is attributed to the direct words of God as spoken to the prophets and subsequently written. But, in the same period there were countless others who were also inspired, just like today with millions of people posting blogs, homilies, and other writings. Scholars who have studied the oldest manuscripts agree that the Torah is the truthful written word of God and core of the Jewish faith that provides directions for leading a moral life.

Christian disciples and evangelists passed on to us that Jesus Christ was and still is the very son of God and that his direct words were written in the Gospels. Further, we believe that Jesus directly gave his disciples and evangelists the authority to "go forth" and teach the world as he would have and that their voices and written words are inspired by God. Hence, we have the New Testament of the written word of God which provides even further guidance for our lives.

The Catholic Church was founded by Jesus Christ to be God's continuing source of direction to his people so that what the Church would definitively teach would, in fact, be truthful. There have been failings of the Church in that regard, but collectively scholars have attributed the core of the Catholic faith to be authentic and consistent with God's will for us, right up to today. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which has commentary from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, further distill God's message for us in today's terminology.

CONSIDERATION: To readers of faiths other than Jewish or Christian, I mean no disrespect or disagreement because I am not familiar with the sources of your faith. I'm addressing these essays largely to Christians and others who are seeking ways to find God. Think about your own sources for God's moral guidance. What's their basis?

OUR MORAL SCALE

Every person has a moral scale that they live by and everything they do registers somewhere on that scale. If you were able to see that scale, you would be able to directly see how good or bad that person was. Caution must be used in this regard because we cannot see what's in another person's heart or mind to cause them to take the actions they do and we shouldn't be too judgmental. But the majority of people tend to agree that crimes of murder, robbery, rape, etc. are wrong and that charity, prayer, doing good works, etc. weigh in as right on a moral scale.

The reasons a person develops a particular moral value and does good or bad things are varied. One's upbringing, education, environment, friends, and family all have influence. With seemingly few exceptions, almost everyone has a reasonable level of conscience and knows right from wrong, even if they choose to do what they know is wrong. Still, regardless of the reasons, a perpetrator of harmful or bad behaviors is responsible for those actions. That's why it's difficult to understand Hitler's horrendous crimes against humanity. Where was his conscience?

Some of the reasons for a person's moral values are internal and spring from one's inherent nature or soul, that life-giving source of conscience. A person may be doing very good or very bad things in their mind and registering that on their moral scale, even though no one else can see it. You can argue that it doesn't really make any difference because no harm, no foul. On the other hand, every good thought improves a person and every bad thought diminishes a person because it adds to or subtracts from their inherent moral scale. Sometimes what seems to be acceptable behavior by the majority may still be morally wrong, such as infidelity and dishonesty. And what is deemed okay in one society may be wrong in another.

The bottom line is that the rules as to what's right and wrong have existed as long as mankind and have been written on stone, paper, and the hearts of all people. The most obvious rules for Jews and Christians are the Ten Commandments. They are:

1. I am the Lord your God, you shall not have other gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.

5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's possessions.

(Exodus 20)

Moral values are commonly known as virtues. The website *Deadlysins.com* lists **Cardinal Virtues**: prudence, temperance, courage, justice; **Theological Virtues**: love, hope, faith; **Seven Contrary Virtues**: humility, kindness, abstinence, chastity, patience, liberality, diligence; **Seven Heavenly Virtues**: faith, hope, charity, fortitude, justice, temperance, prudence; and **Seven Corporal Works of Mercy**: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick, minister to prisoners, and bury the dead. These are recognized in Christian religions.

The Contrary Virtues were derived from the *Psychomachia (Battle for the Soul)*, an epic poem written by Prudentius (c. 410). Practicing these virtues protects one against temptation toward the Seven Deadly Sins: *humility* against pride, *kindness* against envy, *abstinence* against gluttony, *chastity* against lust, *patience* against anger, *liberality* against greed, and *diligence* against sloth.

They can all be expanded by various means. For example, the Heavenly Virtues can also mean:

- Faith – belief, trust, fidelity, loyalty, conviction
- Hope – desire, belief, reliance, expectation
- Charity – generosity, benevolence, helpfulness, mercy
- Fortitude – strength, courage, endurance, resoluteness
- Justice – impartiality, fairness, equity, rightness, dispassion
- Temperance – moderation, restraint, self-mastery, frugality, sobriety
- Prudence – wisdom, vigilance, carefulness, thoughtfulness, discretion

Each of these provides moral guidance for the human spirit. In the sense of a moral scale, the more of these virtues one practices, the better the person.

The opposite is also true; disobeying the Ten Commandments or practicing the Deadly Sins leads a person to moral decline. In turn, all of society is affected.

> *But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.* (Mark 7: 20-23)

Many common faults that we accept as okay in our society are actually immoral and degrade our very existence. The sins of pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth are accepted by most of us to some degree. For instance, alcohol use is deemed okay and even embraced in reasonable amounts, but alcohol abuse has greatly damaged our society. Drunkenness kills alcoholics and innocent victims every day. Alcoholism tears families apart, ruins careers, weakens economies, and impacts judicial and health care systems. The total cost of alcohol abuse is immense and yet we accept alcoholic beverages as an everyday part of our social structure.

Similarly, sex is a natural part of being human; God made us that way. Yet, unbridled sexual freedom and abuse have stressed our collective moral fiber. Infidelity destroys marriages and families. Promiscuity, both heterosexual and homosexual, spreads sexually transmitted diseases and substantially contributes to the worldwide HIV/AIDS epidemic. Pornography is a global, multibillion-dollar industry that corrupts hearts, minds, and relationships at all levels and ages of society. Sexual slavery wastes the lives of children and adults alike. The detrimental impacts on individuals and humanity as a whole are enormous.

Dishonesty, fraud, cheating, white collar crime, etc. all have their origins in the failure of moral values. If we want a better world, we have to realize that it's only possible through moral means and actions.

CONSIDERATION: How do you feel morality and immorality affect your family, your community, and society as a whole?

VALUE SYSTEMS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The purpose of this essay is to think about a better system of rules for the common good. Our current rules and systems of reward and punishment are not sufficiently effective or just. Unlimited rewards for the exclusive few are beyond common sense and the punishment systems are not solving the problems plaguing our society. We need better systems to achieve the common good.

I'm reminded of when the local ferry system built a new ship with a sound system that could also play music to make commutes more pleasant. Soon people complained that they didn't like the choice of music and wanted their own favorite genre played. After getting many complaints and a lack of consensus, the ferry administrators turned off all music. It's been thirty years and I've not heard music on those ships since.

We need a better political system, one that can attain consensus on programs benefiting the common good and implement them. Supposedly that's the way our democracy is designed to work. At least that's the way it works for the winners, and they reap the benefits. But what about the average citizens and the marginalized who suffer? They've lost their voices and must give in to the people in power. That's not consensus; its winner take all.

In order to implement the concepts of the common good, educational systems would need to teach moral virtues and stress the rewards and punishments for good and bad behaviors, respectively. Because virtuous values and behaviors benefit the common good, making them part of educational curricula would not infringe on fundamental values of religious freedom, separation of church and state, and choice. Those who would argue that values are based solely in religion would really be advocating for unregulated individual freedom with no common values. I believe that most people would agree there needs to be a code of behavior for the common good. The problem is that some in our society have argued that values can't be taught or regulated in the public system, and that is harmful to the common good.

To reinforce positive values, the reward and punishment systems need to be more effective in encouraging good behaviors and weaning society off of accepting bad behaviors. For example, alcohol consumption beyond reasonable levels is tolerated, even touted as cool and marketed to make the purveyors money, and yet it's proven harmful to many. We frequently

see examples of DUI cases involving repeat offenders. Alcoholics destroy their own lives and those around them. Yet there's still no connection made between the alcohol producers/purveyors and the harmful consequences; just some catchy slogans like "don't drink and drive." Taxes on alcohol to fund public education about the ill effects may be nice, but that hasn't seemed to reduce negative outcomes.

We also need to do something about illegal drugs and drug abuse. The demand for drugs fuels gang networks and all sorts of violent empires. Our jails and prisons are full of drug users and pushers. The harmful results are fully the responsibility of the drug consumers, who are largely victims themselves. Our common value systems regarding drugs are flouted by many as if there's no harm. What I see in the news is that celebrities die from drug overdose but I never see them being held accountable for their own actions. I guess death is accountability. Something needs to change. Just making it illegal and putting our money in enforcement and prison isn't working.

I think it would be nearly impossible to get a consensus on a common set of values for society because people don't want someone else's values imposed upon them. People have become so used to shouting down anything they don't want that some things just aren't possible to accomplish. Passing legislation at local, state, and federal levels is difficult at best. Few contested items receive a consensus. Protecting the status quo is usually stronger than any attempt to change it, especially if you're already on the winning side.

What's missing in this discussion is the relationship between human values and God's values. God gave us freedom to choose our own values, and Satan stepped right into that gap by projecting all kinds of values contrary to God. What's more, society as a whole has rejected God and denied Satan, so there's blindness to the need for good common values.

CONSIDERATION: How do you think we could solve some of these common problems of society? Does it include value systems? Why or why not?

SEXUAL MORALITY

In God's grand plan for creation from its origin millions of years ago to right here and now, every living thing, all plants and animals of every kind, has a reproductive aspect; otherwise they would cease to exist. So, from our very origin, sex, in its proper place and form, was not only good, but essential for survival.

In the early stages of mankind it would seem that natural sexual activity was unrestrained in order to provide for reproduction and spreading the species throughout the world. The average life span back then was relatively low due to the environment and predators so it would seem a significant amount of sexual activity was required just to keep ahead of the death rate.

So where did the moral constraints on sexual activity in humans come from? First of all, they come from God's natural laws. God imbued mankind with a conscience to distinguish between right and wrong. And right off the bat, Adam and Eve violated God's direct command. That introduced us to sin. Whether you accept that account of creation or not, it's obvious that Satan has also been at work in us from the very beginning. He has always been the underlying reason for mankind's sin.

I can't speak to early civilizations' sexual habits, but I understand there is historical evidence that sex was a significant, natural element of their societies and that they developed moral codes for determining acceptable behavior and punishment for violations of it. The Bible is my only direct source for understanding the earliest moral codes relative to sex and all of God's laws. It seems there were societal norms for proper behavior that were commonly violated. To make his laws clear, God gave Moses (and us) the Ten Commandments. From that point on, those commandments became the most fundamental definitions of morality as directly given by God.

The Sixth Commandment states, "You shall not commit adultery." That has traditionally been understood by many religions and societies to apply to all sexual activity other than that between a married couple, husband and wife. Further, Christ said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28) In those words, even lustful thoughts are identified as immoral.

The fundamental moral principle is that all thoughts, words, and deeds related to sexual activity are immoral unless they are between a married husband and wife. Sexual activity with anyone – by one's self or with a man, woman, or child – other than with one's legitimate spouse is immoral.

In direct contradiction, the fundamental principle of sexuality in the secular world seems to be uncontrolled freedom for every purpose – commercial, entertainment, and personal pleasure.

Further, not all sexual activity between a husband and wife is moral just because they are legitimately married. Rape of one's spouse is immoral. Sexual abuse of any and all kinds is immoral. Sexual activity between husband and wife that purposefully prevents the potential of becoming pregnant is immoral, hence all contraceptives and the morning-after pill are immoral. Why? Because they violate God's natural laws. There are other natural ways that a husband and wife can plan for and control reproduction without them.

Sex is a two-edged sword. It is one of the most beautiful things God created, but it is also one of the most powerful means of destruction the devil has contrived. Sex is very destructive when it's out of place. It causes worldwide health problems, such as sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. Teen pregnancies impact young people in myriad ways before they are mature enough to cope. Abortion is an everyday occurrence. Violent abusers employ sex to hurt, humiliate, and control others. Rapists and those who commit other sexual crimes are sent to prison; we don't want them in our society or around children. Communities revolt whenever a sexual criminal is put in their midst. Sex used wrongly has changed the course of history and humanity for the worse.

Sexual activities outside of marriage are as destructive as drugs and alcohol. Each one blinds the person involved to the bad effects. They redirect children and adults away from positive opportunities and substitute misdirection and disappointment. They reduce a person's values. They may also lead to depression and suicide.

Sex is an extremely powerful force in our lives. Just trying to abstain with little conviction in the principle is not a sufficient response to the moral calling of the Sixth Commandment. What's called for is chastity – that is the pursuit of a higher quality of life without immoral activity of any kind. Chastity is not indulging in illicit sexual activity; chastity is virtuous, pure, decent, and modest in nature. It implies moral excellence manifested by

forbearance from acts or thoughts that do not accord with virginity or strict marital fidelity.

I'm not a theologian and I don't claim to understand God's reasoning for this complicated relationship between sex and sin. There is, however, no question about the certainty of the importance of sexual morality.

CONSIDERATION: Where do you draw the line between moral and immoral sexual activities? What's the basis for that distinction?

THE MORAL CODE – THE CASE AGAINST SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

I think it's safe to say that we all want to enjoy love, respect, peace, freedom, and justice. Note that all of these refer to how we want to be treated by others, or more so, how we want our society to treat us. The premise is that these are all based on a moral code of conduct that we expect others to abide by.

The criminal codes of our society are firm statements in writing as to unacceptable behavior that is punishable under the law by fines, jail time, and prison – the more serious the crime, the more severe the punishment. Crimes are also violations of our moral codes. That is, it's immoral as well as illegal to steal, kill, injure, rape, or perpetrate other misconduct against another person or property. Many people suffer every day from violations of these laws even with the best of enforcement.

Moral codes – no false idols, no adultery, be kind to others – are just as necessary in society. They come from God's natural laws and his commandments. The problem is that they are often not enforced, even by our own families. And because they aren't enforced, they are easily ignored or violated. Worse yet, they are largely untaught in our secular society because we have prohibited our schools from teaching them. Probably all kinds of civilizations have had elements of immoral conduct and lack of moral codes being taught or enforced. I'm not saying that it's worse now than ever, but I am saying that our society has largely set aside moral conduct. Just watch the news or read the papers to see examples. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," says a president. "I didn't force her to have sex; it was consensual," says a star athlete.

In our society, we have criminal codes against sexual misconduct, such as rape, prostitution, pornography, lewd conduct in public, anything involving children, etc. Yet, a lot of sexual activity though not illegal is certainly immoral, such as adultery and pornography.

We set ratings and age limits for minors attending movies and bar them from businesses where sexually explicit entertainment is provided. Yet, there is no civil prohibition against an adult going into X-rated bookstores, strip joints, or other places with sexually explicit entertainment, although some local codes prohibit contact with the entertainers on the basis that it leads to prostitution or other illegal activity. These forms of sexual activity harm many

people and a very strong case can be made that they degrade our society. For example, most zoning codes prohibit such (legal) businesses within a specified distance of a school. I think most cities would ban them if the courts would allow it.

Societies throughout the world pay a huge price in sickness, disease, and death from immoral sexual conduct. We spend huge amounts of money and educational resources to try to make that conduct safe without trying to discourage or eliminate it. The only real solution is chastity and abstinence, not after-the-fact treatment.

We don't have clearly understood codes against immoral sexual conduct such as adultery and fornication. They are taken for granted as permissible, even as necessary in movies and on TV. Many people don't consider that there is such a thing as immoral sexual conduct as long as it's private, consensual, and legal.

So why is it that some sexual behavior is immoral unless it's between a married husband and wife? That's the whole point. Marriage by natural definition is the union of a man and a woman in a complete relationship, a significant part of which is sexual union for the purpose of having children and continuing the human race. Thus, marriage between two people of the same sex is against God's natural law. It is equally immoral for two people, whether of different or the same genders, to have sexual union under any circumstances outside of a legitimate marriage.

The problem is, where do we draw the line and say that's all we are going to allow in our society? Our society hasn't drawn the line on adultery and fornication so why should we stop short of allowing homosexual marriage? You can't argue strongly against it if you accept other immoral sexual activities as legitimate. You have to draw the line based on a moral code and that is any sexual activity outside of legitimate marriage is immoral, period. Just because we haven't drawn the line for some immoral activities doesn't mean we have to enact laws that accept either some or all of those activities. Laws, by their very nature have to be for moral purposes and are patently invalid if they endorse or protect immoral behavior.

CONSIDERATION: Obviously, this is a minority opinion in today's social environment, but that doesn't make the essay irrelevant for consideration. Maybe if enough people agree, society will move toward moral values and behaviors. What do you think?

ABORTION

Why do some politicians and special interest groups continue to push for restraining abortion rights? Because abortion is immoral, unethical, and irresponsible. Because abortion is the product of a liberal society gone too far.

Abortion goes against fundamental moral principles. It's not just the "freedom of choice" or the "termination of a pregnancy"; it's the killing of an unborn child, a child who would grow to be a person just like you and me. And partial-birth abortion is horrific when used on a live child still in the womb and should well be called murder.

Unethical? Doctor's take an oath to provide health care for all patients; that includes unborn children. A doctor performing an abortion makes the choice to go against professional ethics. The mother has an ethical obligation to care for her unborn infant to the very best of her ability. She shouldn't drink alcohol, take drugs, or participate in other activities that could harm the unborn child. It's against the ethics of motherhood to kill her not-yet-born child, just as it is to kill one who has been born.

Illegal? Until the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, abortion was illegal for centuries in societies throughout the world. Many states passed laws regulating abortion and had them overturned by the Supreme Court. How could that happen? Liberal politics, not fundamental legal principles.

Irresponsible? Pregnancy is the result of sexual activity that the partners choose and carry out. People should be responsible for their actions, especially when those actions involve another life. For decades, we have been encouraged to participate in consensual sex as we please and to not to feel guilty for it. Society has tried to remove the negative consequences of sexual activity and choices, and abortion is the ultimate outcome of not being responsible for our actions.

Society has been strongly influenced over recent decades by very powerful forces – politics, media, entertainment, education, and, yes, even religion. Liberal politicians placed the judicial bias in the Supreme Court that gave us Roe v. Wade. Liberal politicians have passed laws encouraging and funding the abortion industry. Generally, the media is liberal in its support for abortion and the "pro-choice" agenda. The entertainment industry has produced increasingly violent, vulgar, and sexually explicit movies, music,

and games to feed the frenzy for unrestrained sexuality. Schools require a liberal sex education with no offsetting moral guidance to balance it.

Supporting abortion is seen as good; standing up against it is seen as bad. Looks to me like the work of Satan because that's the definition of his work: convincing people that bad is good and good is bad. Looks like he's winning.

CONSIDERATION: Think about your own experience relative to women who've had a surprise or unwanted pregnancy. How did they handle it and come to a decision to accept and welcome the child versus having the pregnancy terminated? Did they have the support that they needed to make a decision to keep the child? Has it turned out okay?

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Many people of a wide range of religious faiths believe in God and to hold that belief is protected by the United States Constitution. In that belief, they firmly assent to a moral code, primarily based on the Ten Commandments. One of the commandments states that, "You shall not commit adultery." Taken in context and understood in the light of theology, that commandment includes a prohibition against any sexual activity outside of a valid, heterosexual marriage. Therefore, a large number of religious people believe that homosexual activity is morally wrong.

Their freedom to hold that belief and express it in the current social setting is under attack. They are called many things, including hateful names, for their belief. The supporters of the homosexual agenda themselves ask for tolerance and acceptance of their own preference, but are stridently intolerant of those with opposing beliefs. Generally those with religious beliefs are tolerant of homosexuals, but that tolerance does not equate to agreement with the homosexual agenda, which includes marriage. And because of their belief, they will never accept same-sex marriage as valid, regardless of governmental legislation and court rulings.

It seems advocates for homosexual marriage, like those who are for abortion, have zero tolerance for their opposition. They've basically made new commandments of their demands: thou shalt not oppose same-sex marriage; thou shalt not oppose abortion; thou shalt not express any kind of verbal opposition to our causes. And those of us who disagree with the court of popular opinion are shouted down.

The solution to this conflict lies in tolerance and acceptance of differences of beliefs, but not in pushing the establishment of laws and practices that further repress the freedoms of religion and expression by others with opposing beliefs.

CONSIDERATION: Religious beliefs and practices are protected under the Constitution so they should be tolerated and respected whether you agree with them or not. Regardless of which side you are on relative to these issues, do you agree that tolerance of and by both sides is the goal? Why or why not?

OUR CULTURE OF -ISMS

Atheism, materialism, secularism, humanism, consumerism, commercialism, individualism, relativism, hedonism and sexualism. The culture of –isms; that's the current Western world.

I suspect that many people see those isms as good: good for me, good for the economy, good for life. Look more closely. Those terms are all based on humanism with no place for God. They are not based on love for anyone else, only for oneself.

ATHEISM: complete denial of any form of God and rejection of all religious beliefs. There is no higher good than what we choose to do or believe. And there's no life after death so there's no ultimate consequence; live only for the here and now.

MATERIALISM: being more concerned with material instead of spiritual or intellectual values; the doctrine that comfort, pleasure, wealth and possessions are the only things that matter. He with the most toys wins. It is also a form of idolatry, adoring and placing material things at the highest level.

SECULARISM: a doctrine that rejects any form of religious faith and worship. Its advocates not only reject faith and religion in their own lives, but make every attempt to eliminate them from public affairs, societal norms, and education.

CONSUMERISM: the priority is consumption of goods and services. This is the driving force behind the economies of the world – supply and demand, competition for the almighty dollar, buy on credit so you can have more than you can afford.

COMMERCIALISM: the practice of commerce that shows an undue regard for profit. It's the driving force of consumerism – commercials on TVs, ads in magazines and other reading material, pop-ups on websites, and all the junk mail that fills our mailboxes and recycling bins. It's what drives the bottom line and the stock prices. Success or failure rides on commercialism. I see it as one of the most disgusting elements of our materialistic society.

INDIVIDUALISM: the doctrine that the individual should not be restricted by government or society. In other words, everything should be about what's good for me.

RELATIVISM: based on the idea that all values or judgments are relative, differing according to circumstances, persons, cultures, etc. There are no fixed standard values or morals; they are different for each person based on their own situation. What's wrong for me may be right for you. It's up to each individual to decide how to apply rules and codes of conduct.

HEDONISM: pleasure is the principal good and the proper aim of action. Not only what's good for me as compared to you, but whatever makes me happy is good. If something doesn't make me happy, it's bad.

SEXUALISM: I made this one up because it should be on this list with the others. It's more than sexism or sexualization. It's our lustful society on steroids; everything has to have sexual content or connection. Our language, our entertainment, our idolatry of celebrity, etc. It's on display every day in so many ways; you can't avoid it.

These isms drive our Western culture. As long as we deny God and any form of religion, we can enjoy any of these isms with impunity, accountable only to ourselves unless we violate civil law and get caught. So we just remove all morality and anything goes if it feels good.

And what's wrong with that? It leads to degradation, disorder, chaos. As Dr. M. Scott Peck wrote in *The Road Less Traveled*, unless there is an uplifting force, entropy is eventually terminal. It uses up all of the energy and dies.

And where do we get the uplifting force to counter all these isms? From God and a moral basis that nourishes faith and energizes the community. That's what this is all about.

CONSIDERATION: Are you concerned with our culture of isms? How do they affect your daily life?

CHAPTER 9

PEACE

I suspect that in all of recorded history, certainly not in my lifetime, the world has never been entirely at peace with no war, violence, or injustice anywhere in the world. Why can't we have world peace for just a little while? Why do societies cause or allow war? What would it take to bring about peace for everyone?

WORLD PEACE

Peace! What is it and how can we accomplish it?

The *Webster's Dictionary* defines peace as:

> *freedom from war or stopping a war; freedom from public disturbance or disorder; public security; law and order; freedom from disagreement or quarrels; harmony; concord; and undisturbed state of mind; absence of mental conflict; serenity; in full peace of mind; calm; quiet; tranquility.*

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

> 480. *What does the Lord ask of every person in regard to peace? The Lord proclaimed, "Blessed are the peacemakers." (Matthew 5:9) He called for peace of heart and denounced the immorality of anger which is a desire for revenge for some evil suffered. He also denounced hatred, which leads one to wish evil on one's neighbor. These attitudes, if voluntary and consented to in matters of great importance, are mortal sins against charity.*
>
> 481. *What is peace in this world?*
>
> *Peace in this world, which is required for the respect and development of human life, is not simply the absence of war or a balance of power between adversaries. It is "the tranquility of order" (St. Augustine), "the work of justice" (Isaiah 32:17) and the effect of charity. Earthly peace is the image and fruit of the peace of Christ.*
>
> 482. *What is required for earthly peace?*
>
> *Earthly peace requires the equal distribution and safeguarding of the goods of persons, free communication among human beings, respect for the dignity of persons*

and peoples, and the assiduous practice of justice and fraternity.

Additional items go on to discuss war and the use of military force. All of these are addressed by the Fifth Commandment – You shall not kill.

The secular definition in the dictionary avoids reference to godliness as a characteristic of peace. It presumes that peace can be achieved simply through people being nice to each other. If everyone would just stop fighting, we'd have peace. Well, it hasn't worked like that at all, for a variety of reasons, all of which go against the commandments of God – greed, lust, power, wealth, control, etc.

What's even more disturbing are the real examples, such as those of predatory people moving in after a disaster to loot and defraud the victims who've already lost everything. It seems wherever people are weak, other people will take advantage of them in one way or another.

On the flip side, there are people who come into these circumstances to assist, support, and care for the needs of the victims. Why? Charity! And where does charity come from? God's commandment to love one another.

Peace is a gift from God that can only be felt or achieved when the person or state is in God's favor. True peace is God-like in that it is a product of love for one another as God loves us.

Secular peace, or the absence of conflict, may seem adequate for those who don't accept God as the basis for anything, but it still fails to produce real peace. Why? Two reasons – the absence of God and the presence of Satan. Secular peace permits all sorts of legal activities that work against peace. For example, production of guns, bombs, missiles, and other weapons by the industrial/military complexes of the world is legal and encouraged. In fact, one theory states that war is good for the economy, which is supported by the demand for war arsenals. Arguably, some munitions are supposedly for self-defense or for a balance of power or for a deterrent against aggression by others. The secular world tries to maintain peace to by limiting the abilities of some nations to acquire or develop chemical weapons or nuclear bomb capabilities while retaining their own and allowing uncontrolled production of conventional weapons. It hasn't worked!

World peace requires abatement of all forms of violence between nations and peoples. Two examples are ethnic and sexual violence; I'm sure there are others. "Ethnic violence in organized, sustained form is known

as ethnic conflict or warfare (race war), in contrast to class conflict, where the dividing line is social class rather than ethnic background." (Wikipedia) Recent and current wars around the world also include extreme sectarian violence, such as that between the divisions of Islam.

There is also worldwide sexual violence against children, women, and men that must end if we are to have true peace. Rape is used as a weapon of war in some cultures. Extremists such as the Islamic State and Boko Haram use sexual and personal violence as part of their arsenal. Sexual slavery permeates black market prostitution. The sex industry in South Pacific nations attracts customers from all over the world to take advantage of children. Pornography is widespread. The glut of sexual garbage on the Internet is just a mouse click away. All of this feeds the increase of sexual violence that is as harmful as war itself.

So how can we really achieve peace? Local and world peace can only come when we all turn to the source of peace – God. Only God can win this war against evil.

CONSIDERATION: If you are a prayerful person, please take a few moments to pray for world peace and for all the victims of war, persecution, injustice, poverty, and disaster.

ROAD MAP TO PEACE

During Christmas season one of the main themes is peace on earth. The source of this fervent desire is from the biblical narrative of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. It's the message the angels gave to the shepherds keeping night watch in the fields when they announced the birth of the Savior. The phrase says, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). This affirms the connection between God as the source of peace and people who follow him.

Peace is the presence of harmony, serenity, and tranquility. Conversely, it's the absence of or freedom from war, disturbance, disagreement, and conflict. Peace and evil coexist, each at the expense of the other. The increase of one requires the reduction of the other. We can't reasonably expect to achieve peace without also reducing evil. How then can we desire peace and expect it to come about when our society thrives on and perpetuates so many evils? We must be people "on whom God's favor rests".

We must first create and maintain peace in our families and workplaces, where we can influence the outcome. To do that, we need to increase love, understanding, respect, and compassion. We also need to reduce the evil side by reducing our own faults and transgressions. Abuse, anger, lying, cheating all weaken the potential for peace with those around us. There are numerous other things that degrade peace in our families' lives – alcohol and drug abuse, infidelity and other illicit relationships, selfishness and greed. All of these must be eliminated.

The same applies to our work environments, but other elements come into play. We have a responsibility to work hard and well. We must get the proper education and training to do our jobs. We must act in an ethical and honest manner with respect and support for coworkers. Doing these things will help rid workplaces of unfairness, backstabbing, and rumors.

Bringing about peace in our country requires a popular consensus about what needs to be done and the willingness of the people to do it. To a large degree, we don't have that consensus and we're losing ground. Political, economic, and social divisions are widening. Good leadership is hard to come by. Ethical behavior is disregarded. Economic corruption fattens the wallets of few at great expense to many. Sadly, those are all the natural outcomes of our secular humanism lifestyles.

Peace in our country will require that good people demand good leadership in both governmental and business enterprises. Our political processes need to provide more benefits to the people and less to those in political power. Our legislators and courts need to instill moral values in our society instead of removing them. Our businesses must be honest, just, and productive. We've got to be a society "on whom God's favor rests".

Peace throughout the world will require similar measures on an international level. Power must be returned to the "good" and used for the benefits of the people instead of those in power. Truce is necessary between religions. There will not be peace on earth as long as there are major portions of the world's peoples suffering from poverty, starvation, and disease. Frequently, those people are also subjected to or turn to violence, abuse, and oppression. Instability is rooted in poverty and powerlessness. The solution requires fixing those underlying causes. All peoples need to have their fundamental needs for food, shelter, and healthcare fulfilled. The economic differences between the "haves" and "have nots" must be reduced. The economies of developing nations must be nurtured from within so their own peoples benefit instead of wealthy and powerful entities from elsewhere.

As the song goes, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me".

CONSIDERATION: What do you think it would take to bring peace to the world? What can you do personally to help?

WAR IS IDEOLOGICAL

Here in November 2015, we've just experienced the terrorist attacks in Paris with over 120 killed, another 90 in critical condition and many more wounded, thousands directly impacted and the whole world affected.

One of the analysts on TV was asked if we could defeat the terrorists and he said that we could (at least in theory) but that we couldn't defeat the ideology. That's the key behind it all. War is ideological. It's not just a matter of who has the most guns or bombs or missiles. The one with the most military might may be able to defeat the physical enemy but the war is not over as long as the ideology survives. It never dies; it must be won over in other ways.

That's always been the case in war if you look at it historically. There's always been a powerful ideology behind the aggressors. For example, the two largest 'world' wars were driven by fascism. To understand those wars, you need to understand with that ideology really means. The dictionary defines fascism as: a government characterized by rigid one-party dictatorship, forcible suppression of opposition, belligerent nationalism, racism and militarism. Wikipedia describes it in terms of total militarization of the society. The entire citizenry became involved in the single purpose ideology. And it took the entire citizenry of the allied western nations to overcome it.

The Korean and Vietnam wars were driven by communism. They both have some of the same characteristics of fascism described above. Or look at the current situation in North Korea. It meets all of those criteria behind a war that's never been fully resolved and still stands only in a stalemate.

But I also want to point out the Irish/English wars in this light. That's Christians against Christians, or more specifically, Catholics against Protestants. Why and how can two supposedly God-loving societies go to war? What's behind it? Or the wars between the Shiites and Sunnis in the Muslim world? I'm sure there are many different reasons but where's the ideological reason?

The current wars across the Middle East are driven by extremely militant Muslims. In order to defeat the terrorists, we have to overcome their military might and resources but we also must impact their ideology in some way. We have to understand what that means and how to go about it if we are to succeed. Otherwise, future generations will still be fighting this enemy.

To understand the ideology behind it all, I'll describe it in the same terms that apply to other essays in this book – God versus Satan. God is the source of love and peace; Satan is the source of hate and war. That's behind the ideology of it all. Unfortunately, the western world relies on a third ideology; that's secular humanism – the denial of all things related to God and by nature, denial of the existence or influence of Satan. That's the ideology of our governmental leaders. We may defeat the enemy with our superior military might in the short term but we still won't have won the ideological war.

In reality, we have to also engage in the ideological war but the secular culture denies the existence of the ideology behind the other two factors. They can only base their efforts on secular values – individualism, relativism, materialism, etc., hence military might. The secular government can not wage an ideological war, only a military one, and then, theoretically, only a defensive one. They can attempt to deploy secular values against the ideological enemy but that's exactly what the radical Islamists rally against, calling the secular values Satanist. The spiritual leader of Iran recently said that they are not at war with the western people, but against the western values and policies. We can't win this ideological war with secular values!

And, we can't win this war without God! The opposition claims that God is on their side and we (our secular society) deny that God is even involved. Who's going to win that one? God is involved and he's on the side that is expressed by his values – love, compassion, charity, support, caring for one another. Think virtues, not vices. It's a moral war as much as a physical war.

Further, we are at war within our own culture. I'm not just talking about liberal versus conservative, but moral versus secular. We need to include God in order to have a moral society. Secular values are not the same as moral values even though the secular leaders may claim them to be because secular values include all the other 'isms.' Secular values tolerate fascism and communism as long as they don't infringe on me.

So, in order to win this ideological war, we must bring about a cultural conversion back to moral values based on God. Think the Ten Commandments and moral virtues. We must convert our own society in order to be able to effectively counter our ideological enemies.

God may be on our side but only when we are on his side.

CONSIDERATION: Do you agree that war is ideological? Why or why not? Do you see Satan in war? How else would you understand the basis for war?

PEACE INITIATIVE

The following is an email I wrote in December 2006 to the Vatican Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace:

Your Excellencies,

It's presumptuous of me to suggest anything because I'm confident you all are doing everything possible within your power to try to bring peace and justice to our troubled world. My sense is that the secular world is incapable of peace, largely because they are relying on man's efforts without and/or against God's will. If we are to find peace, I suggest peace is only possible through concerted ecumenical efforts between the Vatican and the primary leaders of the world's major religions. I know that the Vatican has consistently led such efforts for decades and has been largely ignored by the major governments when it comes to this problem.

I suggest and pray for renewed efforts to bring the major religious leaders of the primary organizations, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and others as possible to a new process to create enough pressure on the governmental leaders to allow your process to work.

I suggest that the driving mission is to convince all of the warring parties that peace and care for all of the victims of war is possible through such a process. Cease fire between the Muslims and the western world is really the only hope for peace and justice for the victims on all sides. Somehow, the religious leaders of the western world need to make every effort to communicate this to their Muslim counterparts. The Muslim leaders of all the various factions throughout the Middle East need to be reconciled to their Catholic, Protestant and Jewish counterparts.

An international effort is needed, not only to halt the violence, but to rebuild the Muslim world in the damaged areas as well as the inner cities throughout the western world where so much injustice continues to fuel the problem. It seems that Hezbollah *(at the time of this writing)* has the only successful effort going to bring justice to these peoples, but their efforts are counterproductive. I'm sure that other efforts are being made, but they aren't visible to the media. Unfortunately, no effort can be successful while so much war and violence is preventing other solutions.

I know I'm "preaching to the choir" but feel I must start somewhere and your Office has the standing to suggest renewed efforts with some hope

of the others listening to your call for peace and justice. I pray that your efforts find the right time and way to move forward. I can only cast this prayer and hope for God's love to make it happen. I recognize and truly admire the efforts our good Popes John Paul and Benedict have made and I trust God has supported their every effort. Thank you.

CONSIDERATION: There are many resources on the Internet regarding peace, but I recommend you review and consider the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (See bibliography)

CHAPTER 10

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

This chapter includes just a couple essays that I've written over the years directly related to the Church itself. I could go on and on with new essays, but there are many other books and publications by people far more learned than I. The Church (and other Christian institutions) is always going to be under scrutiny and/or attack by a secular society that doesn't understand or agree with its teachings. I just add my little voice in faith and gratitude for the Church.

CATHOLIC SERVICES

You don't need to be a member of the Catholic Church to enjoy many of its benefits. The Catholic Church is the largest single social service organization in the world providing education, health care, food and shelter, and countless works of charity. The Church has provided millions of priests, brothers, and sisters to serve the needs of society throughout history. With some notable exceptions, they receive only shelter, food, and minimal other compensation. It's truly nonprofit. Wherever there is a need for social services of any kind, the Church has provided its support.

The Church's educational systems and commitments are second to none, from kindergarten through university levels, in most places around the world. Catholic schools are the largest non-public school system in the USA. In 2010, two million students attended 6,980 Catholic schools. At the university level, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops website lists 251 Catholic colleges and universities in the US. The schools may be parochial, but they welcome people of all faiths. Catholic schools traditionally have high-quality education across all subjects, including social values not taught in secular schools.

The Church's health care systems and commitments are universal. The Church and its religious societies have formed hospitals and health care facilities around the world and serve peoples of all races and creeds. Many US hospitals are owned and operated by Catholic agencies. For example, the Catholic Health Association is comprised of more than 600 hospitals and 1,400 long-term care and other health facilities in all 50 states; it is the largest group of nonprofit health care providers in the nation.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States. It was founded in 1943 by the US Catholic Bishops to serve World War II survivors in Europe. It now reaches some 85 million people in 101 countries. The group's mission is to assist impoverished and disadvantaged people overseas. While its purpose is rooted in the Catholic faith, operations serve people based solely on need, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity.

Catholic Community Services (CCSWW) and Catholic Housing Services (CHS) serve people who live in Western Washington. There are 12 CCS family centers in the area. The housing service helps secure permanent

rental residences for those struggling with poverty, intolerance, and racism. There are similar Catholic institutions around the county and the world.

Each and every Catholic parish provides social services to its own community through its organizations and its charities, most staffed by volunteers and funded by donations. For example, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has chapters in most parishes. Members working in conjunction with other local service providers offer personal and financial support to those in need.

Why? Because the Church is truly the Body of Christ. It is called and directed to be his presence to the world. Everything that Christ did in his life on earth, the Church continues to do – feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick. The Church's mission is to fulfill Christ's mission.

CONSIDERATION: Regardless of your faith, what do you know and/or understand about the institutions of the Catholic Church? What's that based on?

MY SOUL AT MASS

The Mass is more than just a gathering and a prayer service. It is fully in communion with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God gives himself to us and we, in a very real sense, absorb him into our own bodies and souls. We become one with him. We come to Mass to fill our spiritual needs, to learn, to renew, and to nourish our faith.

The very core of our Catholic faith is the Eucharist, the Sacrifice of the Mass. In it, Christ himself, body and soul, human and divine is fully present to us. As such, we must conduct ourselves as being in the presence of God, the Almighty Creator, and with Christ, crucified, died, and resurrected. We are, in fact, present at the Last Supper as he repeatedly over all time for all peoples makes himself present in the consecrated bread and wine.

> *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."* (Matthew 26:26)

Once the bread is consecrated, it is transubstantiated to be the very body of Christ. That consecrated bread, his body, is present in the Tabernacle 24/7. If his body is present, so is his soul, his divinity. We are in the very real presence of God every moment we are in a Catholic church where the Tabernacle contains the consecrated bread, the body of Christ. A candle called a sanctuary lamp glows as a sign of his presence.

He is right there for us to approach, to see, and to receive. He is our dearest friend though we may not fully realize or appreciate that. He is our support, our strength, and our guide. He is the very source of our spiritual life that we have come to nourish. And we should show our utmost reverence for his real presence from the time we enter the church until we leave.

We show our respect by signing ourselves with the holy water and genuflecting to the Blessed Sacrament when we enter and when we exit. During the Mass, we listen carefully to every word, including all the liturgical readings and the sermon. God speaks to us through those readings and the priest's words. He also speaks to our hearts in ways that we can only hear if

we are paying close attention and giving him our souls to talk to. We kneel and pray to the present God as we would if he were standing in front of us, which in a very real way he is. Our full and thoughtful participation in the liturgy is necessary.

Some in church, even during the most important parts of the Mass, don't seem to act as they should in God's presence. Over time and practice, one can become devoted enough to pretty well stay in close touch and focus with God's presence, although we are still human and can become distracted or tempted with other thoughts. In fact, we can only become truly present to God through his graces to us. And, if we aren't making a sincere effort to pay attention, we won't even be listening when he tries to give us his graces. He responds to us as we respond to him.

We, in fact, offer ourselves to God in full communion with the offering of the Mass, itself a sacrifice to God. We do so through the prayers and through our own intentions. The priest presides, but we are all part of the offering of the Mass through our attention, our actions, our prayers, and our intentions.

My own prayer both before Mass and at other times throughout my days is:

> *My Lord and my God, I offer thee my life and my love, my prayers and my works, my joys and my sufferings, in union with the offerings of your Church and people, with, in, and through your own Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I offer these in praise and joy, love, and thanksgiving for your many blessings for me and for my loved ones. And I offer these in reparation for my sins, offenses, and negligence.*

CONSIDERATION: If you are Catholic, do you regularly attend Mass? Why or why not? If you do attend Mass, what's on your mind before going to Church, during Mass and afterward? How do you spend your time for that hour or so?

CHAPTER 11

PRAYER

Prayer is essential for our spiritual lives. Prayer is the way we come to know and communicate with God in the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), our Holy Mother Mary, the angels, and saints. Prayer is not only a way to communicate, but to fully connect our lives with God. The most perfect form of prayer is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in which we can be fully in communion with God through the Holy Eucharist, the very body and blood of Jesus Christ. My own thoughts just barely scratch the surface.

THOUGHTS ABOUT PRAYER

Prayer is a communication with God, but is it just in our mind? Is it just wishful thinking? Is it necessary? Is it effective in getting the results that we are looking for? It's taught that God hears all prayers and that he will answer them. Do we see or feel the answers? How do we know?

Prayer is an act of faith in God and in his presence in our lives. Typically, people without faith don't pray because they don't believe in the relationship. I suppose that sometimes they may naturally seek support from someone or something outside themselves for a particular need. They may not have an intellectual understanding of God, but somehow express a need or desire for something. For example, if they are deeply concerned for the health of a loved one and their heart goes out to them, that's a form of prayer. Or maybe they are seeking something from God even though they don't see his role in the outcome. It's what's in the heart that matters and love is the primary measure. That could be prayer in its most basic form.

God is always near us, in fact he resides in us; our soul is created in his image. I couldn't say that he is always talking to us, but certainly he is present at all times. He may be waiting patiently, hoping we will initiate the conversation. It's not that he can't directly communicate to us, but mostly we just aren't establishing our side of the communication. I do believe God intervenes in our lives even when we aren't attempting to pray. He always sees our needs and may provide the answers or support at any time whether we ask for it or not.

Prayer doesn't affect God one way or another; it affects the person who's praying. It improves our relationship with our creator and savior. God is always in the relationship, but we don't hold up our side when we don't pray. It increases our personal expressions of faith, hope, and love. Prayer opens the path for grace to come into our lives. It strengthens our resolve in leading a better life. It gives us peace and consolation.

Prayer needs to reflect our own hearts, not just what we are saying or reading. For example, we can say out loud that we love God or forgive our neighbor, but that may not be what we really feel in our hearts. Prayer is relative to how well we know God. The better we know God, the better and easier our prayer. A lot of life is about habits, and prayer is no exception. Making prayer a habit will establish a better relationship with God.

There are many ways to pray and it's up to each of us to find the way best suited to our circumstances. There are community prayers and private prayers, vocal prayers and silent prayers, musical prayers and poetic prayers. There are rote prayers and extemporaneous prayers. Some follow the same written text and others are prepared for a specific purpose.

The primary defense we have against Satan and the evils bombarding our lives and our culture is prayer. We have to believe in God, or at least hope in God, strongly enough to turn our minds and hearts to him.

Prayer is the key to the gates of heaven; it's essential for our salvation.

CONSIDERATION: What are your thoughts about prayer? What would you add to this description of prayer.

METAPHYSICS OF PRAYER

Prayer, meditation, and devotions to God are conscious, purposeful communications in real words and thoughts, silent or spoken or sung. They can take place anywhere and at any time, public or private.

Prayer is communication with God. We may also pray to our Holy Mother Mary, the angels and saints, and our departed loved ones, but with the recognition that the purpose is communication with God through their intercession.

Prayer is the voice of our soul, our spiritual voice. Because the spiritual world is timeless and without boundaries, prayer and devotions allow us to be present, in a real sense, at the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, especially at Mass. Likewise, the Stations of the Cross and the Mysteries of the Rosary can be prayed so as to transcend our contemporary surroundings and be as one with those present in Jesus's life.

We can be near the apostles who slept while Jesus prayed in the garden and then scattered after his arrest; by Judas who betrayed Jesus; with Peter who said he would never abandon Jesus yet denied him three times; by the leaders of the Jews who falsely tried Jesus; next to Pilate and Herod who conducted their trials in a purely secular manner; in the crowds that shouted "Crucify him" over and over; by the soldiers who whipped Him mercilessly and crowned him with thorns; with the bystanders along the Way of the Cross; alongside Simon of Cyrene who helped carry his cross; by Veronica who gave Jesus her veil to wipe his face; near the women who wept in sadness at the sight of his pain and tribulations; and by the soldiers who nailed him to the cross and crucified him.

We are there and we play a part in the whole event just as they did. But what part did we play? Whose side were we on? What was our own responsibility? What guilt do we share? In a very real sense, we are just as guilty as Jesus's persecutors because it's for our sins that he died. That's what makes this concept so powerful. Not only are we just as guilty, but Jesus is just as loving and forgiving. So hopefully, we can all be in a similar position as the "good thief" who was told by Jesus, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 24:43).

So prayer can and should be much more than just words. It is attentive communication. Of course, we can be easily distracted when praying, which reminds me of a story a priest once told:

> A young man wanted to be a better person and went to a very wise man and asked him what to do. The wise man told him he had to pray the *Our Father* with his whole heart and soul. As a test, the wise man told the young man that if he could say the *Our Father* without distraction, he would give him the beautiful white horse that was in the pasture. The young man said he would love to have that beautiful horse; he could see himself on it. He knew this would be a real test of his faith, so he got down on his knees, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the words as he prayed: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" and then he turned to the wise man, "Will you also give me the saddle to go with it?"

It takes more than concentration and will power to pray with real purpose. It takes the grace of God to open our hearts and minds and it takes faith in God to be open to that grace. And that requires continued attention to the task, a regular prayer life. We have to show God that we love him and are open to his grace in our lives. For Catholics that means going to Mass and absorbing the fullness of the prayers, homily, and devotions. It means going to confession as often as needed to keep our conscience at peace with God. It means praying as we go through the daily functions of life. It's the same as they say about exercise – use it or lose it. If we don't continually practice prayer, we won't be able to pray with conviction.

Prayer takes place in our mind, just as many other things do, from imagination of unreal things to invention of very real things or solving very real problems. Prayer may be seen somewhere in the range from imaginary to real, but it becomes more real as we attune our thoughts to God rather than just mouthing the words. For nonbelievers, prayer seems imaginary, but for the faithful, it is very real.

For example, we have conversations in our minds with the people around us throughout our day. We may choose to not say the words aloud, but they are still very real in our minds. Probably our relationships with other people occur as much in our minds as they do in physical expressions.

Similarly, when we have a problem, we figure it out in our minds before we put the solution into practice – like creating a recipe for a dinner in our mind before preparing it with food. I have designed several real projects in my mind before I built them out of real materials, yet they were just as real in my mind as they are now in physical reality. So it is with prayer. We can and do have real conversations with God even though they take place in our minds, or better yet, in our hearts and souls.

Prayer is very much a two-way communication with God. It begins with an act of faith to assure God that we really do believe he is on the other side of the communication. It includes an affirmation that we acknowledge God as our creator and benefactor who will be responsive to our needs as we pray. Prayer is respectful and appreciative of God, who gives us life and all that we enjoy. We need to convey our appreciation for the good things and accept the not-so-good. We must admit our sins and failings, and ask for his forgiveness.

From that point on, we can pray for our loved ones, both living and dead; for our friends, neighbors, and colleagues; for our community and our country; for those in special need here and throughout the world; for peace and justice; for anything.

We can say formal prayers or meditative prayers. We can read scripture or related writings and think deeply about them. We can pray for moments or hours in any form or place. We just have to be open to God, giving him our consideration and listening to him as he guides us. God does talk to us, but we don't hear him with our ears; we hear him in our souls. It takes practice and attention to hear with our souls. God speaks to us through the responses that come to us in our minds when we are ready for them. He also talks to us through other people, books, and many sources we understand with our physical senses; we just have to recognize them as such. In a way, this essay is a way of my listening to God. For you, the reader, it may be a way for God to talk to you. Take some time to pray about it.

CONSIDERATION: How do you understand prayer as a link between our physical world and God in the unseen spiritual world?

QUIET PRAYER

Recently the readings and homily at Mass talked about finding God in quiet places in order to better hear his voice.

The First Book of Kings 19:11-13, calls us to silence when listening for God:

> *Then the Lord said (to Elijah), "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will be passing by." Elijah waited through the winds and the earthquake and the fire before he determined that God was coming. "After the fire, there was a tiny whispering sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance to the cave." Then the communication with God took place.*

The Gospel describes the death of John the Baptist. "When Jesus heard of it, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." (Matthew 14:13) The crowd followed and when he disembarked the boat, he was "moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick." He then fed them with the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. "Then he made the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he (Jesus) went up on the mountain by himself to pray." That's where he was headed before the crowd had engaged him. The Gospels have other accounts of Jesus seeking isolation and quiet in order to pray.

Our pastor frequently says that we need to sit silently to hear God's response and that he will speak to us. I don't do that well enough, but I have had several experiences where I left an open question, sat quietly, and quickly found an inspirational response. Was it God's response or just my self-projection of an answer? Maybe some of both. It wasn't earthshaking or astounding, just simple answers I hadn't previously considered. Why do I attribute them to God? Because they are consistent with his direction.

Why don't we listen more and talk less? First, we don't set aside and commit the time to do so. We commit just enough time to get the job done because we're busy and want to move on to other things. We fill the time

with our side of the conversation and then quit. God hears it and may answer but we've moved on.

Second, quiet times for prayer may open the door to distractions. We have a lot of other things going on that require our thinking time. We lose our concentration. And, I pose, that Satan has an influence in distracting us. I've experienced that many times, when I'm trying to concentrate on my prayers, but my mind just goes somewhere else in an instant and I'm going the wrong direction.

Third, we haven't made the effort to discipline ourselves to prayer. That takes time and effort. We can attend classes or retreats that teach techniques to guide and help us. We can read books and articles that may help, but we've still got to commit ourselves to the effort.

Fourth, it requires a sustained effort. We can't get to a level of comfortable two-way communication with God the first time. We don't know how. We haven't developed a commitment to it. We may start and stop and have to start over again at the beginning. I've spent many years going through the motions, doing my part, but not really learning how to listen for the response.

That's what led to the whole effort of these essays and book. It was mostly on extended runs when my mind was bouncing around with everyday things that I would start thinking about any one of these topics. One day I decided to start writing them down before they completely went out of my mind. Some got written down, others just came and went. Over time, they added up and the issue became what to do with them. I decided to just keep writing while waiting for direction sometime later in the process. And maybe that's all there is to it. Maybe that's my way of listening to God.

CONSIDERATION: How do <u>you</u> listen to God? If you pray regularly, how do you develop your listening skills?

CHRIST'S TEACHING ABOUT PRAYER

How can we best learn about prayer? Perhaps by considering Christ's own words when he talks about prayer and gives specific examples. Christ's own prayer reflects his relationship with the Father and provides a model for us to follow. The first instance we see in the Bible of Jesus mentioning God the Father is as a 12-year-old when he is found in the temple and responds to Mary and Joseph's concerns of his whereabouts with, "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?" (Luke 3:49) We too must be in the Father's house. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls that filial prayer, that is, the response of a child to his father. That's an important element in our own prayer, as we are God's children and he our father.

When Christ prays, he begins with thanksgiving and acknowledges that all comes from the Father. This provides a model for us that we need to always give thanks at the beginning of our own prayer. The *Catechism* says that we give thanksgiving before we ask for what is to be given.

Christ also subjected himself and the outcome of any event to the will of the Father; "not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). We need to place ourselves in the care of the Father and accept that his will be done. We do that in faith, hope (trust), and love.

We see Christ's love in all of his prayers; his own love for the God the Father and his love for those he is praying for. We need to have a loving heart and attitude in our prayers.

The most obvious prayer we learned directly from Jesus is the *Our Father.* In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus says, "This is how you are to pray."

Luke 11:1-2 explains the setting for this prayer. "He was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.' He (Jesus) said to them, when you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name..."

The *Catechism* devotes a full section to many different considerations for prayer (2558-2758) and explains the *Lord's Prayer* in great detail. (2759-2865) St. Augustine concludes, *"*Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer." (2762) St. Thomas Aquinas says: "The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers. ... In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them." (2763)

Just before teaching them the *Our Father*, Jesus said to the apostles:

> *When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* (Matthew 6:5-8)

If that is Christ's direct teaching about prayer, how do we justify public prayer? We go to Mass or other religious functions and pray out loud in public. The *Catechism* partly answers that question with:

> *But when we pray, do we speak from the height of our pride and will, or 'out of the depths' of a humble and contrite heart? He who humbles himself will be exalted; humility is the foundation of prayer.* (2559)

Isn't that what Jesus is saying; do not pray with pride, but with humility?

Similarly, the Pharisee prays out of pride as compared to the tax collector who prays out of humility and repentance, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Prayer needs to respect the relationship between ourselves and God.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Luke 11:9) That would seem to indicate it's just that easy; your prayers will be answered as you wish. We know God answers our prayers, but in his own time and way and not necessarily as directly and explicitly as we wish.

I see in these examples that Jesus was always praying to the Father. Like him, we must have a close relationship to God the Father that we recognize, appreciate, and nurture in prayer.

CONSIDERATION: Do you use the Bible for prayer? Why or why not? If you do, how do you use it to guide your prayer?

CHAPTER 12

PERSONAL

I've included these essays addressed to the important people in my life to help you to see further through *A Window into My Soul*.

TO MY LOVED ONES

You wouldn't want me to tell you this directly, but maybe you'll read it. There is something very fundamental going on here. And it's speaking to your heart if you will listen to it.

We all want companionship and love and respect from others, especially our own husbands and wives and children. When we don't get it adequately in the way we want, we are hurt and look for reasons why our spouse or our children don't love us enough. And then we look to find others who can provide it – parents, friends, other companions.

What we don't see and usually deny is that the one who loves and respects us most is God. He can provide the answers to our deepest longings. We think love and respect are human and emotional gifts that we can find from someone else when, in fact, they are spiritual gifts from God. We do find them in some people, but they get it from God first, and God brings them into our lives to supply the love and respect we need.

On the other hand, and just as involved in the spiritual side of our needs, Satan and his angels are constantly offering temptations to turn us away from God. Satan prompts us, teases us, rewards us, and undermines our efforts to have God fill our needs. A small step at first, then a bigger step, and so on. When we put enough distance between ourselves and God, we can take more and even bigger steps away without looking back.

You may say that it's not real. You can't see it or feel it. How can we know it? Well, being separated from God allows Satan to build a wall that blocks our hearts, minds, and souls from knowing what is truly just and moral. It's an insidious, invisible wall so we can deny its existence. Then, we can ignore and violate the rules that are written in our hearts without feeling guilt. If we don't feel guilt, then we have been totally blinded to the very visible God.

The conundrum is that we can't solve it without God's help. When we need God's guidance most is when we are least likely to see it because of the Satan's wall and interference. We have to acknowledge that God really is in our lives and loves us. We have to acknowledge our faults and failings and ask for his forgiveness and help, which he is ready to give. As human beings, we fail and fall, and we need God's forgiveness in our lives. We

need to reform our commitment to stay out of the Devil's snares and return to God's ways.

What does that sound like? Praying the *Our Father* – "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." The *Act of Faith* – "I believe in God." The *Act of Hope* – "I hope to obtain the pardon of my sins and the help or your grace." The *Act of Love* – "I love God above all things and I love my neighbor as myself." The *Act of Contrition* – "I am truly sorry for having offended you, my God, because you are all good and deserving of all my love."

Going to confession is the most fundamental answer of all. The grace of God is greatly available in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It includes an acknowledgment on our own part that we have truly broken God's laws and need his forgiveness. It includes accepting responsibility for our failings. It includes a commitment to do better and to fight the real underlying problem. No problem is too great to address freely in confession, and a good priest can help in ways no one else can. I have always marveled at the guidance provided during confession.

Our reward is God's grace to help us resolve our blindness about our failings and to give us the strength to renew ourselves. Once we have gone to confession, we no longer have to feel guilty for our failings. That in itself is worth the price. The burden of guilt is lifted and there is a new resolve to be better.

Reformed and strengthened, we are much more able to address and solve our problems, especially those that are fundamentally spiritual in nature. And the best part, the greatest gift available to us, is to then receive the Eucharist, the very essence of the body and blood of Christ. The nourishment and strength, the light and the love of God Himself present for us.

DEAR TEENAGER

I love you and want the best for you, so I want to offer some help. Please read and think seriously about what I have to say and maybe it will help you along the way.

Go into your room, close the door, and sit down. Close your eyes and think about these questions: Who am I? What am I really doing here? What do I like and not like? What would I like to change and what would it look like if it changed the way I want it to? Then, take out a piece of paper and write down what you've figured out.

Next, close your eyes again and, in your mind's eye, see the walls that hold you in. The walls in your mind are just as real as those in the physical world and they keep you from becoming the person you'd really like to be. Those walls are your perceptions of your situation. They can prevent you from seeing what is best for your future. There are also several doors in those walls in your mind. Those doors lead to different paths your life may follow.

What do you want your future to be – not specifically who you are married to or what your job is – but what things would make you happy? What will it take for you to be successful?

There is a theory about the ranking of what people need and want in life. The first things are the essential ones – food and shelter. You can't really worry about fame and fortune if you are homeless or hungry. There are far too many people in that situation, and I hope that's not going to be your place. The next level of need is family and friends and their love for you. It's too soon to decide, but you can probably see yourself in some kind of a family environment – married or not, kids or not – and enjoying life. You need to respect and care about others in order to expect someone else to share your life. You can't choose your parents or your siblings, but you can choose your life mate and friends. They have to choose you too, because they could leave you or kick you out if you don't respect and love them.

Having a good job is the next step up in the hierarchy. Hopefully, it will be an occupation you are passionate about because you won't really enjoy life if you don't like your job. Some people don't like their work and don't have much choice to change it. If you want a good life, you have to plan for a good job and strive to do your best. I pray success is yours.

The highest level is being able to control your own work effort, whether that's to be the boss or at least being able to direct your own accomplishments. That's called self-actualization. The more you are able to control your own outcome, the more satisfying your life will be.

Now it's time to open those doors that lead to your future.

The first door is education. You've got to get a high school diploma to have a realistic hope for a decent job and a better life ahead. Nothing else is more important right now. Screw this one up and you will mess up an opportunity for a better life. Don't let anything – friends, drugs, alcohol, or lack of self-discipline – keep you from doing better in school. You already have two strikes against you so don't take strike three. And taking a walk won't get you to second base. You need to have enough discipline and knowledge to accomplish more than minimum-wage jobs if you want anything more than the basic essentials. You can't have a nice home, a decent car, or any other amenities if you can only work for minimum wage.

The next door is a better education. That doesn't necessarily require a university education, but many good jobs can only be gotten with a college degree. Most other good jobs require some level of training beyond high school. Generally, better education leads to better jobs and more chances for success. The better education you have, the more choices you will have and the more control you will have over your own life. But you won't get there without a high school diploma.

There is also a good chance that you could meet your life partner when you are pursuing your next round of education. And that person will be working to make a better life for themselves too. You need to consciously put yourself in the right places to find the right person to be your life's companion.

Do not enter the door labeled "drugs". No one who goes through that door will have any real success in gaining the satisfaction they want or deserve. That path is full of crime, violence, and self-destruction. Many young men and women who choose that door end up dead or victims of violence. No one in that culture is afraid of hurting you to fulfill their own drug desires. Many are in it for your money. The others are victims themselves.

The other door to avoid is "alcohol". It seems like a fun outlet everyone is partaking in and that you have to drink to be cool, but alcohol is addictive, just like other drugs. It kills your abilities to control your own actions. It

makes you sick. It drags you down and keeps you from achieving your goals. It negatively impacts your chances for success in whatever field you choose. Many otherwise successful people are alcoholics, and they ruin their own lives and the lives of the people they love.

The third door that can lead to destruction is one of bad choices about friends and how you apply yourself. You make your own choices. Some will affect your whole future – doing poorly in school, minor crimes such as driving without a license and shoplifting, wasting your talents, lack of discipline. You may fail to meet your own goals just by not applying yourself.

There is one more door. That is "religion," if you want the peace and love that comes from that choice. One of the darkest walls that can surround a person is their own conscience, knowing how and what they've screwed up. Depression, anxiety, and self-doubt are almost always spiritual afflictions. The best way to stay away them is to have a good spiritual life. Faith also leads to the hope and love that can only come from God. And with God, anything is possible.

So I truly hope you choose the right doors and take responsibility to do your best in high school. Then, you will have the best choices available when you are ready to move on.

FOR AUNT SYLVIA

Human beings are unique in all of creation. We are different than all that we see in this world because we are made in the image and likeness of God. Our soul is what separates us from the rest. Our soul lives in us now and does not die when our body finally gives up the spirit. Our soul lives on – death is just a different kind of doorway we pass through.

How do we know this? Because God himself became a human being, Jesus Christ, and shared in our heritage to show and tell us about God the Father and Holy Spirit. Jesus promised us that, like himself, we would live on after death. So we can know with confidence that Sylvia is not dead, but alive. After his resurrection, Jesus continued his earthly mission with his apostles until ascending into heaven. He said that in his father's house there were many rooms and that he was going there to make a place for us.

Throughout scripture, God tells us about himself and about heaven. He shows and tells us that he has love and mercy for each one of us. So it is with trust in his love and mercy that we ask his blessing for Sylvia, to welcome her into his eternal home of peace and love. We ask that he bless all of our departed family members and all our loved ones so that they may all enjoy the fullness of God's home. And we look forward to joining them in our father's house when our time comes.

APPENDIX A

MY PRAYERS

As a way to initiate my prayer, I say *My Lord and my God,* perhaps several times, to focus my attention and as a greeting to God. It's like saying hello or good morning to someone we know very well. Most Catholics begin all prayer, *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit* while making the sign of the cross.

MY PURPOSE

My Lord and my God, I believe in you, I trust in you, I love you. I want to do your will and bring your love to all those whom I love.

All those whom I love, includes all of my families and relatives, all of my friends, neighbors, colleagues, and their families from throughout my life, both living and deceased. For all of those living, I pray for their health, security, and their future, and especially for their spiritual lives; conversion, renewal and reparation, and for their eternal life in heaven. For all of our departed loved ones, I pray that they have completed the path through judgment and reparation and now enjoy the fullness of eternal life in heaven.

MY DAILY OFFERING

My Lord and my God; I offer thee my life and my love, my prayers and my works, my joys and my sufferings, in union with the offerings of your Church and people; with, in and through your own Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I offer these in praise and joy, love and thanksgiving to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; in thanksgiving to our Holy Mother, Mary; in thanksgiving to our holy angels and saints; in thanksgiving to our holy loved ones in heaven; in thanksgiving to all those who support us (my loved ones) *in any way; and in reparation for our sins.*

TO GOD, OUR FATHER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen.

TO GOD, THE SON

O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy.

TO GOD, THE HOLY SPIRIT

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit and they shall be created, and you will renew the face of the earth.

GLORY BE

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

TO OUR HOLY MOTHER, MARY

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

HAIL, HOLY QUEEN

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send

up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O merciful, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary! Pray for us O Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ. Amen.

MY OWN PRAYER TO MARY

Immaculate heart of Mary, our Holy Mother, our Lady of Lourdes; please pray for all of my loved ones both living and deceased in their special needs.

TO ST. MICHAEL, THE ARCHANGEL

St. Michael, the Archangel, defend us in the battle. Be our protection against the malice and snares of the devil. We humbly beseech God to command him, and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Hosts, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all of the evil spirits who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE POOR SOULS IN PURGATORY

The traditional Catholic prayer for the Poor Souls is:

Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord, and let your perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and all of the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

My prayer for the Poor Souls is:

My Lord and my God; I believe in you, I trust in you, I love you. I want to do your will and bring your love to the souls in Purgatory. I pray that they may soon complete their journey and enter the gates of heaven with the fullness of your love and mercy, for it is the fire of your love that cleanses their souls, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WHEN WASHING

Cleanse my heart and my soul, my mind and my body of the stains of my life that I may serve you without defilement.

GRACE BEFORE MEALS

Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

GRACE AFTER MEALS

We give thee thanks for all thy blessings, Almighty God, who lives and reigns without end. Amen. And may the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

MY THANKSGIVING PRAYER

Dear Lord, we offer you our praise and thanksgiving for your abundant goodness and blessings on our families. We enjoy the gifts of love and peace, health and security, comfort and pleasure that can only come from you.

We are mindful of and pray for the many who can't enjoy these blessings, for those suffering in our families, our friends and neighbors, our community and country, and throughout the world.

And we thank you for this day with our families, for the love and support of each one and for this wonderful meal; for all these good things come from you. Thank you. Amen.

APPENDIX B

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

The *Stations of the Cross* or *The Way of the Cross* is a devotion or mini liturgy in the form of a series of prayers related to fourteen (14) *Stations* depicting the passion and death of Jesus Christ. It follows the Last Supper, the agony in the garden, the scourging at the pillar, and the crowning of thorns. Typically, in every Catholic church, there are pictures or plaques or sculptures depicting each *Station*. There are a number of different pamphlets and texts that are used for this devotion. I wrote my own version below in 1995. Of course, the complete description is in the Bible, Matthew 26-28.

INTRODUCTION

God is timeless. Although we don't understand this concept in our terms of days and years, generations and centuries, somehow we fit in to timelessness. In a sense, it's as if everything that has ever happened or will happen is happening right now.

In this frame of mind, Christ's life, death and resurrection are happening right now and we are, in fact, playing a role in our own daily lives. We are somewhere in the crowd as Jesus is betrayed, captured, accused, blasphemed, persecuted, convicted, condemned, and crucified.

The goal of this reflection is to bring us to a fuller awareness of the relationship between Christ's sacrifice and our own everyday lives. We are actually following in his footsteps on our own Way of the Cross as we endure our own daily trials and sufferings. As Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Let us do so with courage and faith in our Lord.

Also, upon serious reflection, we come to realize that Christ's suffering is just as much our own fault as a result of our sins, offenses, and failings as it was of the people who persecuted him 2,000 years ago. We share fully in their guilt and will be judged for it when our time comes. In reality, we are actually experiencing some of it in our lives right now.

When we see our own lives in this light and realize that we have an opportunity, a responsibility and a choice, we need to decide how we relate to Jesus' suffering and death. This version of the Stations of the Cross is a short meditation on how it may affect our lives.

Wouldn't our lives, our community, and the world be much better now if we could stop the daily rejection of Christ in all of our lives? If we can exercise and diet to make our bodies healthy, why can't we undertake serious spiritual exercises through reflection and prayer to bring about a better life of love and peace? Isn't much pain and suffering a result of our own and collective inhumanity to one another? Isn't this all a part of our Way of the Cross?

The following is my version of the Stations of the Cross:

Opening Prayer

LEADER: Dear Father, we take this time to commemorate your son's Way of the Cross, his persecution and death as a sacrifice for our salvation. We pray that the example he has given may help us to understand your will for us in our own daily lives. We follow in his footsteps in our own difficulties and suffering. We also acknowledge our own guilt for his suffering as a result of our sins, offenses and failings.

ALL: Dear Lord, please help us to spiritual renewal and reparation through our reflections on your suffering and death on the holy cross. Please help us in our lives to correct our shortcomings and increase our service to your will. You gave your life for us so we pray that it may be brought to its fullness in our lives.

The First Station – Pilate condemns Jesus to death on the cross

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus is condemned to death, not just by Pilate and the people, but by each and every one of us. We condemn him when we reject him and try to remove him from our lives. We condemn him in our lives of sin and neglect. We join with his persecutors in shouting, "Crucify him; crucify him!"

ALL: Dear Lord, we share fully in the guilt of your condemnation with Pilate and the people of that time. Through your love and mercy, guide and help us to make the right choices and not to reject you in our lives. Help us to recognize you in all the peoples whom we reject and condemn, because they are your embodiment.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Second Station – Jesus takes up His cross

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus is already exhausted and suffering from the scourging at the pillar, but now much more is loaded upon his shoulders – the heavy and holy cross. Yet he submits to the will of the Father knowing that the cross he carries is the way to the ultimate victory over death.

ALL: Dear Lord, You carried a great load and suffered enormously under it. We know that the cross is really your way of carrying

our sins, offenses, and failings as the means for our salvation. Have mercy and forgiveness on us for our share in this load that bears so heavily upon your shoulders.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Third Station – Jesus falls the first time

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus fell under the heavy load of the cross in great pain and suffering. He fell, not just because of his torture but also because of the weight of our sins, offenses and failings. It is our load that brings him down.

ALL: Dear Lord, we recognize our own guilt in your burden and we are sorry. We, too, fall under the weight of our sins and bring suffering to others through our offenses. We pray for your guidance and support as we try to understand your will and follow in your footsteps under our own crosses.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Fourth Station – Jesus meets His afflicted Mother

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Mary shared deeply in Jesus's pain and suffering. The arrows that Simeon had foretold pierced through her heart. We shoot those arrows when we offend her Son, our Lord.

ALL: Dear Lord, your Holy Mother shared your pain without knowing what it meant or what it would lead to, but with faith in your mission and God's will. In doing so, she became an integral part of your salvation for us, our Holy Mother. May she share with us that faith, hope and love that we may carry out your will and join both of you in salvation.

Hail Holy Queen —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Fifth Station – Simon is forced to help carry Jesus' cross

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Simon was called from the crowd and had to be forced to help carry Jesus' cross. He happened to be at the right place at the right time to be called to serve God's will and to help carry the load of our transgressions. God calls us all to carry our own crosses and to help carry the crosses of others in need.

ALL: Dear Lord, we pray for your Holy Church and all the priests and religious, the missionaries, and the laity who answer your call to serve your people. We pray for continued calls for vocations to your service. We pray for the leadership, truth, faith, and fidelity of your servants to your will.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Sixth Station – Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Veronica stepped courageously out of the crowd to give Jesus comfort with love and tenderness. He responded in appreciation and encouragement by leaving the image of his face on her scarf. She represents those whom God has chosen to carry out his love and mercy to the afflicted and suffering peoples of the world.

ALL: Dear Lord, we pray for all those who follow Veronica; the missionaries, ministers, religious and laity who serve your needy throughout the world. We pray for your doctors and nurses, employees and volunteers and many good people who serve your people in need throughout our community and the world.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Seventh Station – Jesus falls the second time

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus fell again under the enormous load of the cross and our unfaithful lives. Even with the support of Simon and the caring of Veronica, he was overwhelmed. Yet he fought to get up and continue on to the ultimate sacrifice.

ALL: Dear Lord, we pray for all those that fall under their heavy loads; the dying and the suffering, the sick and the disabled, the poor and the hungry, the lonely and the needy, the homeless and the jobless and for all those in special need of your love and mercy. We pray to help pick them up when they fall.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Eighth Station – Jesus cautions the women of Jerusalem

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: The women of Jerusalem are our representatives along the Way of the Cross. We, like they, watch on with sad hearts at the suffering of our brothers and sisters from a distance. You admonish us to pray for ourselves and our families.

ALL: Dear Lord, we pray for ourselves and for our families, relatives, friends and neighbors for we each need your love and mercy. We pray for spiritual life and direction, for conversion, renewal and reparation and for our ultimate salvation.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Ninth Station – Jesus falls the third time

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus fell the final time under the burden of the holy cross and our sins. With the determination and strength of character that only he could maintain, he got up and carried on knowing that it was the Father's will and that it would lead to the ultimate victory.

ALL: Dear Lord, through your love and mercy, please help us with the will and discipline of character to carry on under our own loads, always looking forward to the ultimate end of death to this world and the life beyond with you being worth the effort.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Tenth Station – Jesus reaches Calvary and is stripped of his garments

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus finally reached the end of his tortured journey and now stands before the world, a convicted criminal of the people, and an example for us all. He was then stripped of all his possessions and his dignity.

ALL: Dear Lord, we too will reach the end of our journey and will face death to this life, stripped of all of our worldly possessions. Please help us to understand the meaning of death in our lives

and to be prepared to face it. If it is your will that we face a suffering death, please help us to bear it with your support, your love, and your mercy.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Eleventh Station – Jesus is nailed to the cross

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus showed no objection or reaction to the terrible pain of his wounds. We revere his wounds and his holy blood that flowed from them for us. We recall his words at the Last Supper that his blood would be shed for our salvation.

ALL: Dear Lord, we thank you for your sacrifice and the continuing renewal in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Please help us to be faithful to your Holy Sacrament. And help us to recognize that we too are nailed to our own cross, the very life we live, and that how we live is relative to how we will die.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Twelfth Station – Jesus dies on the cross

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus was at last relieved of the suffering and pain by death to this life. He would soon show us that death was only a step that he must take in order to go beyond this life to his ultimate life as our Savior. We must follow him through that door.

ALL: Dear Lord, please help us to have an unending faith in your everlasting life and that sharing in your life is our own ultimate goal. Help us to face our own death and that of our loved ones with that same faith and through it to our eternal salvation.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Thirteenth Station – Jesus is taken down from the cross and placed in the arms of his Holy Mother

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: What an eternal vision of grief of a loved one! Mary, torn by the terrible torture, suffering and death of her son, shared this final moment in this life with him. Not knowing what was yet to come must have made that moment extremely tragic.

ALL: Dear Lord, please help us in the grief of our own loss of our loved ones. But also please help us at those times with the knowledge and faith in your resurrection and promise of salvation after death. This life will end, but it is only a short step into eternity.

Hail Holy Queen —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

The Fourteenth Station – Jesus' body is placed in the tomb

LEADER: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you (Genuflect)

ALL: Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world. (Rise)

LEADER: Jesus was finally placed in the tomb, presumably for the corruption of his body. How hopeless it must have felt to his Holy Mother and the Apostles. Jesus was dead and buried.

ALL: Dear Lord, please help us in our hopelessness with faith in your resurrection. And we pray for the eternal salvation of our departed loved ones, our families, our relatives, our friends, and our neighbors. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through your mercy, rest in peace.

Our Father —

O my Jesus; forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of your mercy.

Closing Prayer

ALL: Dear Lord, we have reflected on the separate actions of your condemnation, suffering and death, your Holy Mother's role in sharing it, and the role of the people who participated in it. We pray that you may help us to understand our own role in it and ask for your mercy and forgiveness. We pray that your ongoing suffering may be lessened by our own sharing in our Way of the Cross. And we pray for your peace and love and mercy for all the peoples of this world who suffer continually under the weight of all our sins, offenses and failings.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

APPENDIX C

THE ROSARY

THE ROSARY

(Go to YouTube and type in the words "Rosary Prayer" and select one of many videos of people praying the Rosary.)

The Rosary is two things: a prayer chain and/or a series of prayers to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit together with Jesus' Holy Mother Mary that tells the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The physical Rosary is a prayer chain (pictured above) comprised of a small crucifix, a medallion of our Holy Mother Mary, also known as the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a loop of beads for fingering while one prays the separate prayers. The crucifix is fingered while saying the *Apostle's Creed*,

the prayer stating the articles of faith of the person praying. The first single bead is fingered while saying the *Our Father*, the prayer to God the Father as given by Jesus when he taught the Apostles how to pray. That is followed by a series of three beads to be fingered while saying three *Hail Marys* for an increase in faith, hope, and charity/love. That is followed by a single bead which is fingered while saying the *Glory Be* prayer. (See text of prayers below.)

Next is the medallion of the Holy Mother Mary, where one states the particular Mysteries to be contemplated with this recitation of the Rosary (below). Attached to the medallion is a loop of beads as follows. There are five sets of 11 beads on the loop, each one representing a Mystery in the life of Jesus. The first bead in each set is fingered while saying the *Our Father* followed by ten beads to be fingered while saying ten *Hail Marys*. After the tenth bead (while fingering the space before the next bead) the *Glory Be* is said. That series of one bead followed by ten beads is repeated five times for the five decades of the Rosary.

That describes the physical Rosary, the prayer chain itself. Until one becomes accustomed to saying the prayers associated with the physical Rosary, the prayers may need to be read or just prayed in rote if one remembers all of the prayers without much in mind except to follow the beads and recite the prayers. For many years of my own life in reciting the Rosary, the rote prayers were the best I could do as my mind tended to wander while losing concentration and without the focus of contemplation. I think that's typical for most who don't pray the Rosary on a regular basis.

Once one becomes accustomed to praying the Rosary, the real meaning starts to take hold; that is, to meditate on the life of Jesus as represented by each one of the beads in the Mysteries. Each bead tells a short, simple story taken from the Bible. Some say that the Rosary is their Bible in as much as the complete set of Mysteries describes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Each bead is an opportunity to say a short prayer describing that particular story and one contemplates it while saying the prayer associated with it.

That becomes the power of the Rosary; serious and deep meditation on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus while fingering the beads and reciting the prayers. You are present in each story of Jesus's life with each bead. You are there, witnessing and taking part in the events. The people in the story are right there around you. You may have the emotions of the story,

happiness to sadness to joy. This is because you are bringing the story – Jesus's life – alive, here and now, through your contemplation.

The Rosary is a very special devotion to Mary and her role in the life of Jesus. Because of that role, she has a very special place with God as queen of heaven and earth. As one prays the Rosary in a reverent way, one becomes very close to Mary as she plays out her role in the story of each bead, directly or as a witness to it. It is Mary's own prayer and you are just participating with her in it. Mary herself has repeatedly instructed her people to pray the Rosary during the various miracles of her presence, such as those at Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe.

BRIEF STORY OF MARY

God's plan for our redemption is through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His presence to humanity was only possible through his conception and birth to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In order to become man in every way, God had to come into humanity through a very special woman. God chose Mary to be the mother of his son. The Church teaches that Mary is the unique Immaculate Conception. That is, Mary was conceived and born holy and without the stain of sin that the rest of us are born with. God prepared Mary for her role as his own mother from her own very beginning, her conception.

Mary was born a Jew and raised with the traditions and cultures of her faith. Having been born without sin and preserved from the temptations to sin, she was spotless and pure. As a teenager she was visited by the Archangel Gabriel who asked her to become the Mother of God (the Annunciation). Her acceptance became her gift to God, who then made her unique in his very own life on earth. Jesus became man within Mary's womb through the power of God with no loss to her virginity, hence her name Blessed Virgin. God himself took flesh within Mary from the moment of Jesus' conception.

Hence, the first decade of the Rosary tells the story of the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, and her acceptance of motherhood. All of the rest of the Rosary meditations follow from that first "yes" to God.

MYSTERIES AND DECADES OF THE ROSARY

There are four Mysteries of the Rosary. Each Mystery contains five stories that are prayed and contemplated with each set of ten beads, hence a decade of the Rosary.

The Joyful Mysteries tell the story of the annunciation; the visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth; the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; the presentation of Jesus to the priests to fulfill Jewish law; and the finding of Jesus in the Temple.

The Luminous Mysteries tell the story of five major events in the life of Jesus: his baptism by St. John the Baptist in the river Jordan; the wedding at Cana where he began his public life of ministry; the proclamation of the Kingdom of God to the people; the transfiguration of Jesus; and the institution of the Eucharist, or the Last Supper.

The Sorrowful Mysteries tell the story of the end of Jesus's life: the agony in the garden before his arrest; the scourging at the pillar when he was whipped to near death; the crowning of thorns; the carrying of the cross; and his crucifixion and death on the cross at Calvary.

The Glorious Mysteries tell the story of Jesus's resurrection from the tomb; his ascension into heaven; the descent of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles on Pentecost; the assumption of Mary, body and soul, into heaven; and the coronation of Mary in heaven as queen of heaven and earth.

Each story is parsed into brief descriptions of ten components of the story, one for each bead in the decade.

HOW TO PRAY THE ROSARY

The Rosary can be said alone, either silently or vocally, as one finds most suited to his/her own style of prayer. Frequently, there are opportunities to pray the Rosary with a group in an organized manner. One person is designated the Leader and the others respond. The Leader position is commonly shared by the participants, typically with a different leader for each decade.

The Rosary can be said with or without a brief sentence before each *Hail Mary* of each decade that describes the story. This text is a way to guide one's meditation on the story.

The *Apostle's Creed* is said in unison. The *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, and the *Glory Be* are split between the leader and the unison response. The following is the text for the prayers of the Rosary.

(Begin in unison) *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

THE APOSTLE'S CREED (in unison while fingering the crucifix)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell; on the third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from there He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Amen.

THE OUR FATHER (while fingering the first bead and the subsequent first bead of each decade)

(Leader) *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

(Response in unison) *Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. Amen.*

HAIL MARY (while fingering the set of 3 beads at the first and the 10 beads of each decade)

(Leader) *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

(Response in unison) *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

GLORY BE (the concluding prayer of each decade)

(Leader) *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.*

(Response in unison) *As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

After each decade, say the following prayer requested by the Blessed Virgin Mary at Fatima (in unison): *O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, lead all souls to Heaven, especially those who have most need of thy mercy.*

After the completed Rosary, pray in unison:

Hail, Holy queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope! To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary!

(Leader) *Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.*

(Response in unison) *That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.*

(Leader) *Let us pray.*

(Response in unison) *O God, who's only begotten Son, by His life, death, and resurrection, has purchased for us the rewards of eternal salvation, grant, we beseech Thee, that meditating upon these mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may imitate what they contain and obtain what they promise, through the same Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

It is common to also add the Prayer to St. Michael before the conclusion.

St. Michael, the Archangel, defend us in the battle. Be our protection against the malice and snares of the devil. We humbly beseech God to command him, and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Hosts, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all of the evil spirits who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

(Pray in conclusion) *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

THE MYSTERIES OF THE ROSARY

As suggested by Pope John Paul II, the Joyful mysteries are said on Monday and Saturday, the Luminous on Thursday, the Sorrowful on Tuesday and Friday, and the Glorious on Wednesday and Sunday (with this exception: Sundays of Christmas season – The Joyful; Sundays of Lent – The Sorrowful)

The following sentences, each to be read/said prior to the corresponding bead's *Hail Mary*, are entirely taken from the Dominican Fathers' Rosary Center website.

THE JOYFUL MYSTERIES

The First Joyful Mystery
THE ANNUNCIATION

1. The time for the Incarnation is at hand.
2. Of all women, God prepared Mary from her conception to be the Mother of the Incarnate Word.
3. The Angel Gabriel announces: "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with thee."
4. Mary wonders at this salutation.
5. The Angel assures her: "Fear not ... you shall conceive in your womb, and give birth to a Son."
6. Mary is troubled for she has made a vow of virginity.
7. The Angel answers that she will conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, and her Son will be called the Son of God.
8. The Incarnation awaits Mary's consent.
9. Mary answers: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word."
10. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

Spiritual Fruit: Humility

The Second Joyful Mystery
THE VISITATION

1. Mary's cousin Elizabeth conceived a son in her old age ... for nothing is impossible with God.
2. Charity prompts Mary to hasten to visit Elizabeth in the hour of her need.
3. The journey to Elizabeth's home is about eighty miles requiring four or five days.
4. Though long and arduous, the journey is joyous, for Mary bears within her the Incarnate Word.
5. At Mary's salutation, John the Baptist is sanctified in his mother's womb.
6. Elizabeth exclaims: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."
7. "How have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"
8. "Blessed is she who believed that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled."
9. Mary replies: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit finds joy in God my Savior."
10. Mary serves her cousin in all humility for three months until the birth of John the Baptist.

Spiritual Fruit: Love of neighbor

The Third Joyful Mystery
THE NAVTIVITY

1. Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem to comply with the decree of Caesar Augustus.
2. The hour for Mary to give birth is near, but there is no room in the inn.
3. In the stillness of the night, the Savior is born in a cave, Mary remaining a Virgin.

4. She wraps Him in swaddling clothes and lays Him in a manger.
5. In unspeakable joy, Mary gathers to her bosom the Flower of her virginity.
6. Jesus enters the world in poverty to teach the lesson of detachment from earthly things.
7. The angel announces to the shepherds: "Today there is born to you in the town of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord."
8. The angelic chorus sing: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth."
9. The shepherds come to the stable to pay homage to the Infant Jesus.
10. The Magi come to adore the Holy Child and offer Him gifts.

Spiritual Fruit: Poverty of spirit

The Fourth Joyful Mystery
THE PRESENTATION

1. Observing the law of Moses, they take Jesus to the temple to present Him to the Lord.
2. According to the Law, the firstborn male child of every family should be consecrated to the Lord.
3. Mary offers her Son to the Father, then ransoms Him back at the price paid by the poor.
4. Jesus is not subject to the law of Moses, yet to teach obedience, submits to it.
5. Mary is not subject to the law of purification, yet in humility she submits to it.
6. God had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah.
7. Recognizing the Child, he prays: "Now you can dismiss your servant in peace. You have fulfilled your word."
8. "This Child is destined to be the downfall and rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed."

9. And to Mary, Simeon reveals: "And your own soul a sword shall pierce."
10. After they fulfill all the Law requires, they return to Nazareth.

Spiritual Fruit: Purity of mind and body

The Fifth Joyful Mystery
THE FINDING OF JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

1. When Jesus is twelve years old, He goes with His parents to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover.
2. After the feast of the Passover, Joseph and Mary unknowingly set out for Nazareth without Jesus.
3. At the end of the first day's journey they discover Jesus is missing.
4. His parents return immediately looking for Him.
5. This loss causes grief and anxiety beyond our understanding to the hearts of Mary and Joseph.
6. On the third day, they find Jesus in the Temple among the Doctors who were astonished at His wisdom.
7. Mary: "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been searching for you in sorrow."
8. Jesus: "Why did you search for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"
9. Jesus goes down with them to Nazareth, and is subject to them.
10. Mary keeps all these things in her heart.

Spiritual Fruit: Obedience

THE LUMINOUS MYSTERIES

The First Luminous Mystery
THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

1. John is baptizing in the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance.
2. "I am the voice of one crying in the desert, make straight the way of the Lord."
3. "One mightier than I is coming after me."
4. "I have baptized you with water, He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."
5. Seeing Jesus, John exclaims: "Behold the Lamb of God."
6. Against protests of his unworthiness, John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan.
7. After Jesus's baptism a voice from Heaven: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."
8. The Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove.
9. In this heavenly manifestation is instituted the sacrament of baptism.
10. The divine Trinity is manifested: the voice of the Father is heard as the Spirit descends upon the Son.

Spiritual Fruit: Gratitude for the gift of faith

The Second Luminous Mystery
THE WEDDING AT CANA

1. Jesus, His Mother and disciples were invited to a wedding in Cana.
2. During the wedding feast the wine ran short.
3. Mary turned to Jesus: "They have no wine."
4. Jesus replied: "What would you have me do? My hour has not yet come."
5. Mary said to the waiters: "Do whatever he tells you."

6. There were six stone water jars, each holding fifteen to twenty gallons.
7. Jesus bids the waiters to fill the jars with water, and then draw some out and take it to the chief steward.
8. The chief steward said to the groom: "Every man serves the good wine first... but you have saved the good wine until now."
9. At Mary's request, Jesus worked His first miracle.
10. By His presence, Christian marriage was raised to the dignity of a Sacrament.

Spiritual Fruit: Fidelity

The Third Luminous Mystery
THE PROCLAMATION OF THE KINGDOM

1. "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."
2. "My kingdom is not of this world."
3. "Unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."
4. "Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God as a little child will not enter into it."
5. "I have come to call sinners, not the just."
6. "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you."
7. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
8. "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied."
9. "Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
10. "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

Spiritual Fruit: Desire for holiness

The Fourth Luminous Mystery

THE TRANSFIGURATION

1. Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain to pray.
2. Jesus was transfigured before them.
3. "His face became as dazzling as the sun, his clothes as radiant as light."
4. This was to fortify their faith to withstand the coming tragedy of the Passion.
5. Jesus foresaw the 'scandal of the cross,' and prepared them for it by this manifestation of His glory.
6. Moses and Elias (representing the Law and the prophets of the Old Testament) were conversing with Jesus about His passion.
7. "Do not think I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets ... but to fulfill them."
8. From a cloud came a voice: "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him."
9. Jesus admonishes them not to tell the vision to anyone until the Son of Man rises from the dead.
10. We too will behold the transfigured Jesus on the Last Day.

Spiritual Fruit: Spiritual courage

The Fifth Luminous Mystery
THE INSTITUTION OF THE EUCHARIST

1. "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."
2. Jesus took bread, blessed it: "Take and eat, this is My Body."
3. Taking the wine: "This cup is the new covenant in my Blood, shed for you."
4. At that Eucharistic meal, Jesus celebrated the first Mass.
5. At every Mass the sacrifice of Calvary is made present.
6. At the Last Supper Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Orders to perpetuate this sacrifice.

7. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him."
8. The Eucharist is a sacrifice inasmuch as it is offered up, and a sacrament inasmuch as it is received.
9. In the Mass we offer ourselves to God, and God gives himself to us.
10. The Mass will be fruitful in the measure of our surrender to the Father.

Spiritual Fruit: Love of our Eucharistic Lord

THE SORROWFUL MYSTERIES

The First Sorrowful Mystery
THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN

1. Jesus comes with his disciples to Gethsemani: "Stay here, while I go yonder and pray."
2. Entering the garden with Peter, James, and John, Jesus prays, "My soul is sorrowful unto death."
3. Jesus sees the sins of all mankind, whose guilt He has taken upon Himself.
4. He sees the wrath of the Father which His sufferings must appease.
5. So great is his anguish that His sweat becomes as drops of blood falling to the ground.
6. An angel appears to Him from heaven to strengthen Him.
7. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet, not My will but Yours be done."
8. Finding the disciples asleep: "Could you not watch one hour with me?"
9. Jesus is betrayed by Judas, cruelly bound and led away.
10. Father, by the merits of the agony of Jesus in the Garden, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Spiritual Fruit: God's will be done

The Second Sorrowful Mystery
THE SCOURGING AT THE PILLAR

1. Jesus is taken before the High Priest where He is falsely accused, buffeted and insulted.
2. The Jewish leaders take Jesus before Pilate, for only he can impose the death penalty.
3. The robber, Barabbas, is preferred to Jesus.
4. Pilate can "find no cause in Him" yet to appease the Jews, he orders Jesus to be scourged.
5. The scourge is made of leather thongs to which are attached small sharp bones.
6. Jesus is bound to a pillar and cruelly scourged until His whole body is covered with deep wounds.
7. The Lamb of God offers His suffering for the sins of mankind.
8. Jesus suffers so much in His sacred flesh to satisfy, especially, for sins of the flesh.
9. The prophesy of Isaiah is fulfilled: "He was wounded for our iniquities, He was bruised for our sins."
10. Father, by the merits of Jesus in this painful scourging, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Spiritual Fruit: Mortification of the senses

The Third Sorrowful Mystery
THE CROWNING WITH THORNS

1. Pilate asks, "Are You a king?" Jesus answers: "I am a King, but My kingdom is not of this world."
2. In the praetorium, the soldiers place an old purple robe on Jesus in mockery of His claim to be a king.
3. They fashion a crown out of thorns, and forcefully press it down upon His head.

4. In His bound hands they place a reed, as a sceptre, in mockery of His kingship.
5. Kneeling before Him in derision, they spit on Him, and cry out: "Hail, King of the Jews!"
6. Taking the reed from His hand they strike Him on the head, driving the thorns more deeply into His scalp.
7. Pilate brings Jesus before the people, hoping His pitiful sight will soften them: "Behold the man!"
8. Their response: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"
9. Our Blessed Lord submitted to this terrible humiliation to make reparation for our pride.
10. Father, by the merits of this painful humiliation, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Spiritual Fruit: Reign of Christ in our heart

The Fourth Sorrowful Mystery
THE CARRYING OF THE CROSS

1. One condemned to death by crucifixion is forced to carry the cross to the place of execution.
2. The suffering of Jesus is intense as the cross is laid on His bruised and wounded back and shoulders.
3. Weak and exhausted from loss of blood, lack of food and rest, Jesus falls three times under the cross.
4. Jesus meets His afflicted Mother causing untold anguish in the Hearts of Son and Mother.
5. The countenance of Jesus is disfigured with blood and sweat, with dust and spittle.
6. Veronica wipes His face, leaving on her towel the image of His countenance.
7. Fearing that Jesus might die on the way, the soldiers force Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross behind Jesus.

8. Jesus speaks to weeping women; "Weep not for Me, but for yourselves and your children."
9. "If anyone is to be My disciple, let him take up his cross and follow Me."
10. Father, by the merits of this painful journey to Calvary, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Spiritual Fruit: Patient bearing of trials

The Fifth Sorrowful Mystery
THE CRUCIFIXION

1. The hands and feet of Jesus are nailed to the cross in the presence of His afflicted Mother.
2. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."
3. "This day you will be with Me in paradise."
4. "Woman, behold your Son. Son, behold your Mother."
5. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"
6. "I thirst."
7. "It is finished."
8. "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit."
9. The side of Jesus is pierced with a lance. His body is taken down and placed in the arms of His Mother.
10. Father, by the merits of the crucifixion and death of Jesus, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Spiritual Fruit: Pardoning of injuries

THE GLORIOUS MYSTERIES

The First Glorious Mystery
THE RESURRECTION

1. The body of Jesus is placed in the tomb on the evening of Good Friday.
2. His soul descends into the realm of the dead to announce to the Just the tidings of their redemption.
3. Fearing the body of Jesus will be taken, the chief priests place guards at the tomb.
4. On the third day Jesus rises from the dead, glorious and immortal.
5. The earth quakes as the angel rolls back the stone, the guards flee in terror.
6. The holy women coming to anoint the body of Jesus are amazed and frightened to find the tomb open.
7. An angel calms their fears: "He is not here. He has risen as He said."
8. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalen and Peter and two disciples on the way to Emmaus.
9. That evening He appears to the apostles behind locked doors: "Peace be unto you ... do not be afraid."
10. Jesus breathes on them and gives them the power to forgive sin.

Spiritual Fruit: Faith

The Second Glorious Mystery
THE ASCENSION

1. Jesus remains on earth forty days after His Resurrection to prove He has truly risen from the dead.
2. He commissions the apostles to preach the gospel to every creature, and promises to be with them forever.

3. He will not leave them orphans, but will send the Holy Spirit to enlighten and strengthen them.
4. Jesus proceeds to Mt. Olivet accompanied by His Mother and the apostles and disciples.
5. Extending His pierced hands over all in a last blessing, He ascends into heaven.
6. As He ascends, a cloud takes Him from their sight.
7. Jesus ascends to take His place at the right hand of the Father.
8. What jubilation there must be amid the angels of heaven at the triumphant entry of Jesus.
9. The wounds in His glorified body are an endless plea before the Father on our behalf.
10. The disciples leave Mt. Olivet and "return to Jerusalem with great joy."

Spiritual Fruit: Christian hope

The Third Glorious Mystery
THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. The apostles are gathered in the upper room where Jesus had held the Last Supper.
2. They are persevering in prayer with Mary, the Mother of Jesus.
3. A sound comes from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it fills the whole house.
4. The Holy Spirit descends on each of them in the form of tongues of fire.
5. Filled with the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, they are enlightened and strengthened to spread the gospel.
6. Having lost all fear of the Jewish leaders, the apostles boldly preach Christ crucified.
7. The multitudes are confounded because every man hears them speak in his own tongue.
8. The Holy Spirit comes upon the Infant Church never to leave it.

9. That first day Peter goes forth to preach and baptizes three thousand.
10. The feast of Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, for on that day it begins to grow.

Spiritual Fruit: Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Fourth Glorious Mystery
THE ASSUMPTION

1. After the apostles have dispersed, the Blessed Mother goes to live with John, the beloved disciple.
2. Mary lives many years on earth after the death of Christ.
3. She is a source of comfort, consolation and strength to the apostles.
4. As she had nourished the infant Jesus, so she nourishes spiritually the infant Church.
5. Mary dies, not of bodily infirmity, but is wholly overcome in a rapture of divine love.
6. Her body as well as her soul is taken up into heaven.
7. After her burial the apostles go to the tomb and find only fragrant lilies.
8. Jesus does not permit the sinless body of His Mother to decay in the grave.
9. Corruption of the body is an effect of original sin from which Mary is totally exempted.
10. The bodies of all mankind, at the last judgment, will be brought back and united again to the soul.

Spiritual Fruit: To Jesus through Mary

The Fifth Glorious Mystery
THE CORONATION

1. As Mary enters heaven, the entire court of heaven greets with joy this masterpiece of God's creation.
2. Mary is crowned by her divine Son as Queen of heaven and earth.

3. More than we can ever know, the Hearts of Jesus and Mary overflow with joy at this reunion.

4. Only in heaven will we know the great majesty of that coronation, and the joy it gave to the angels and saints.

5. Even the angels, who by nature are greater than humans, hail Mary as their Queen.

6. Mary shares so fully in the glory of Christ because she shared so fully in His suffering.

7. Only in heaven will we see how central is the role of Mary in the divine plan of redemption.

8. The angels and saints longed for the coming of her whose heel crushes the head of the serpent.

9. Mary pleads our cause as a most powerful Queen and a most merciful and loving Mother.

10. A great sign appeared in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

Spiritual Fruit: Grace of final perseverance

POSTSCRIPT

The goal of this book is to have a positive effect on the reader. I hope it helps people realize that every thought, word and action has a consequence in their lives, either positive or negative. They have a consequence for themselves, for their loved ones, for their community and the world. Every life affects the balance of good and bad in our world, for better or worse. Failure to do the positive things contributes to the lack of goodness is the world.

But my real focus is not on solving the world's problems but on helping solve individual people's problems. Many of those problems are really spiritual in nature and need to be addressed in a spiritual way. The real answer is and can only be found in God. We can not solve these problems by ourselves without God being part of the solution. God can and will solve these problems when we allow him to be a part of our lives.

The corollary is that all personal, community and world problems exist because people follow Satan's ways instead of God's. If we don't have God in our lives helping us make the right decisions, we allow Satan to dictate the agenda. And that seems to be where we are headed.

Finally, the consequences are real and will affect our eternal outcome – heaven, hell or purgatory in between. We determine our own outcome by the choices we make every day. We will only make strides towards a better outcome when we see and understand the consequences well enough to make a difference in the choices that we make.

I hope and pray that you make the right choices. God bless you.

And please share your thoughts on our website and social media: http://www.windowintomysoul.com

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